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MFC - 006
Folklore: Canon, Multimediality, Interdisciplinarity and Social Epistemology

Block

4

FOLKLORE AND SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY

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BLOCK 4 : FOLKLORE AND SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY

Dear Students,

Welcome to the Block 4 of the Course VI of the M.A. programme in Folklore and Culture Studies (MAFCS). This block is entitled "Folklore and Social Epistemology," and it consists of four units respectively on folklore and caste, folklore and gender, folklore and tribe, and folklore and religion. This block will attempt to understand the relationship of folklore, both as a concept and a discipline, with certain significant sociological themes that have gone a long way in determining the direction of folklore studies for over a century now. The first unit will enable you to develop a comparative understanding of the two concepts of caste and class. You will be introduced to the concept and functions of the *jajmani* system and its deep connection with the caste system in India. In the course of this unit, you will also learn about two important minstrel castes, namely, the *jogis* and *mirasis*. The second unit will undertake a broad study on the diverse ways in which gender gets constructed culturally and historically, with particular reference to the performance cultures of India. The unit will also study the manners in which gender, as a concept, has developed historically in India, with singular focus on its interface with diverse folkloric practices. With the help of select case studies, this unit will also enable you to appreciate the changing patterns of women's participation in various folk-performing cultures which have traditionally been dominated by men. The third unit undertakes an important venture into the nature and history of 'tribal folklore'. It explores the overlaps and differences between folk literature and tribal literature, and also interrogates the accepted meanings of certain terms/concepts common to both the domains. This unit also discusses the specificities of 'tribal folklore' vis-à-vis ecology (human–nature relationship), agrarian economy, marriage systems, and also the constitutional provisions for safeguarding the rights of the weaker sections of the country. The fourth unit deals with the twin concepts of 'folk religion' and 'religious folklore' and the shared characteristics and heterogeneity of religious expressed through folklore in India. Besides these, the unit also explores the place of regional or vernacular religious practices and their significance as folkloric practices within the local geography. You will be able to learn about the pluralistic dimensions of religious practices that have existed outside the domain of 'organised religion' and how they have been sustained and kept alive within the folk cultures of a region. Hope you have a happy reading experience!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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UNIT 1 FOLKLORE AND CASTE

Structure

1.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- know about folklore, folkloric traditions and folklore as academic disciplines of studies;
- learn about caste system and four *varnas* as a rigid hierarchical structure of society in India;
- understand the *jajmani system* in Indian villages;
- understand and appreciate the vitality of *Jogi* and *Mirasi* castes as minstrels (esp. in Punjab) in Indian culture.

1.1 INTRODUCTION: DEFINITION OF FOLKLORE AND CASTE

Folklore is an integral, pervasive, and vital part of our daily lives. Whether we live in remote areas or in urban settlements, folklore encompasses our lives. We all have common features in one way or another—telling stories, enjoying and celebrating events, performing rituals, using figurative language. We express what we know, think, believe, and feel in wide-ranging and varied ways. Folklorists consider these expressive forms, processes and behaviors, both traditional and identifiable, as folklore. Defining folklore, though, is challenging, yet it can be described as traditional art, literature, knowledge and practices that is disseminated largely through oral communication and behavioral examples. Every group with a sense of its own identity shares as a central part of that identity. There are numerous folk traditions that people believe and follow. The term 'folklore' was coined by the British antiquarian William Thoms in the year 1846. Folklore is a tradition based on "any expressive behavior that brings a group together, creates convention and commits it to cultural memory" (Harring I). Folklore is all about human nature and mindset which are transmitted in the forms of folk narrative, material culture, social folk customs, and performing folk arts. It has passed on from generation to generation through the spoken word for centuries and has kept alive their imaginative

character. It has been noted by Carl Wilhelm von Sydow that folklore varies from region to region and suggested that this indicates the communities' adaptation to their own cultural environment. It has been an eternal part of every culture since ages. It has served as a narratological device in modern scholarship of Indian culture.

It is illustrated further that folklore is "that part of any culture which depends more on imitation and oral transmission than on formal instruction or written sources" (Clarke and Clarke 2). It is concerned with the ways people make meaning in their lives. Folklore, as an academic discipline, studies material from all areas of life, and across various disciplines like anthropology, history, literature, music, arts and crafts, language studies and many other related disciplines. Folklore is 'naturally' part of oral/non-written traditions of any society around the world, which have remained instrumental in shaping the cultural life of the mass. From this point of view, we can take folklore as synonymous with the expression of consciousness of the larger masses of the society irrespective of their religions and class differences. Noted folklorist Alan Dundes says that a folk group is a group made up of two or more people with at least one attribute in common. As he further says, such groups are brought close together through "[m]yths, legends, folktales, jokes, proverbs, riddles, chants, charms, blessings, curses, oaths, insults…tongue-twisters, and greeting and leave-taking formulas" (387). Another folklorist William A. Wilson has rightly said that the study of folklore is not just a pleasant pastime useful primarily for whiling away idle moments. Rather, it is centrally and crucially important in our attempts to understand our own behavior and that of our fellow human beings.

India is a diverse country both—ethnically and religiously. Given this diversity, it is a difficult task to generalize widely about the folklore and caste of India as a unit. Various heterogeneous traditions, numerous regional cultures and different religions have grown and flourished here. Caste is a rigid hierarchical structure of society in India. As a social institution, caste is not peculiar to India. All societies have divided their people into various groups on grounds of particular traits and talents, equipment and opportunity, character and culture since time immemorial. Nevertheless, only in India did such broad divisions of mankind crystallize into a code and an ethic which govern and dominate every detail of the workaday life of particular groups. Once these divisions, depending upon individual and group tastes, traits, and talents, were brought about, occupational and professional differences strengthened them even more, for the fact that one kind of occupation was more lucrative than another led to economic differences which became yet another prop of the caste system. It became common for the son to follow his father's profession. Consequently, occupational differences became hereditary. In this way, birth and occupation became the twin basic principles on which the caste system in Hindu society rested and revolved. In the course of some centuries,an elaborate code of conduct affecting meals, migration, marriage, and morals came to be drawn up. To the original basic principles of birth and occupation were added heredity and endogamy, and the subsequent development of caste has rested on all these four attributes.

Caste is not an Indian word; etymologically it is derived from the Spanish word 'casta', meaning 'lineage' or 'race' or 'a group having hereditary quality.' There is another meaning 'pure' from the Latin word 'castus'. The Spaniards too were among the pioneers using this word. It is from the Portuguese that Indian applied the same. The word 'caste' started appearing in 1740s in the academics and was hardly found before 1800. It was used as early as 1555 AD in terms of race and breed. Further, 'casta' as

it is a Spanish word, was applied to the mixed breed between Europeans, Indians (American) and Negroes. Till the 17th century, 'casta' had not been used in its Indian sense. Now it has influenced all other uses in Indian social system and structure. It can be taken as a hereditary endogamous group, encompassing a common name, common traditional occupation, and common culture, distinctiveness of status and constructing a lone homogenous community. It remains hereditary in nature.

Let us try to understand the *varna vyavastha* (system) first. It started in the Vedic era around 1500 BC. Varna means colour. Relatively speaking, *varna* system was not that much rigid during 1500 BC-1000 BC. But it is from around 1000 BC that the word *asat shudra* emerged. As a result, several diversified occupations and occupational groups appeared and came to be known by different *jatis* (castes). Thenceforth, *varnavyavastha* (system) became the textual model or book view of Indian social system. *Jati* (caste) is the contextual view or field view of Indian social system i.e.,we see *jatis* in reality and not *varnas.* There are only four *varnas*, whereas there are about 4000 *jatis*. In every region nearly 200 *jatis* are found. We witness a pan-Indic *varna* hierarchy, say for example Brahmins who are on the top, next Kshtriyas on position two. Vaishyas are at the third position and Shudras at the bottom of the hierarchy. This hierarchy of *varna* was in uniformity throughout in India, but in *jati* a uniform hierarchy throughout India is not found. *Jati* is placed outside the *varna vyavastha* (system). In *varna vyavastha* (system), one can have an alternative to change one's status with improved socio-economic condition, but not so in the case of *jati* (caste). Hence, one should not take *varna* and *jati* synonymously. Further, castesystem is based on ritual criterion, whereas class is based on secular criterion. There is also another perception about the caste that the "twice born" castes—Brahmans, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas—have descended basically from the original Aryans or invaders outside, while the masses of *shudras*, untouchables and tribal people—the vast majority of the Indian people—have descended from the conquered non-Aryan indigenous people.

1.2 *JAJMANI* SYSTEM AND CASTE

Traditionally, it was said that caste system has been functional for the society, particularly in the economic sense. It is nothing but known as the *jajmani* system. It is a system of traditional occupation for the lower castes, particularly the service caste. Those who serve are known as *kamins* and they used to serve higher castes known as *jajmans*. The *kamins* provided specialized skills and services to the *jajmans* and, in return, they used to get rewards in kind (food grains). The relationship between *jajmans* and *kamins* used to be a permanent and hereditary relationship i.e., after the death of the *jajman,* his son would be a *jajman*, and the same would be applicable to the *kamins*. The system simultaneously shows caste dependency in our social structure. The caste people are known by their caste traits and continues from generation to generation. Thus, it remained a functional relationship in rural India.

1.2.1 Concept and Functions

Jajmani system, as have been said above, denotes conventional occupational commitments by the early economically independent castes in India. There used to be the traditionally specialized occupation of a villager who followed the specialization assigned to his caste. The occupation of certain skilled people used to be exchanged in a village society. The built-up relationship between the 'serving' and the 'served' caste

people was not contractual, individual, impersonal, temporary or limited, but it was caste-oriented, long-termed and broadly supportive. This system with long-lasting bonding between a landowning family and the landless families that provide them with goods and services is called the *jajmani system*. This is perceived as the backbone of village economy. It is highly associated with the caste system. Etymologically, the term *jajman* has been borrowed from the Sanskrit word *yajman*, which means a person who performs a *jajna*. Thenceforth, if some *yajna* is to be performed, for that the services of some Brahmins are essentially needed. It was with the passage of time that its use became common to everyone who hired services or to whom the services were given. The study of Harold Gould has described the *jajman system* as inter-familial, inter-caste bonding pertaining to the patterning of superordinate–subordinate relations between patrons and suppliers of services. The patrons are the families of 'clean' castes, while the suppliers of services are the families of lower and 'unclean' castes.

It could be said that the *jajmani* system is a system of distribution whereby the landowning families of high castes are provided services and products by various lower castes such as carpenters (*khati*), barber (*nai*), potter (*kumhar*), blacksmiths (*lohar*), washermen (*dhobhi*), sweepers (*chuhra*), etc. The serving castes are called *kamins* (*kam karne wale*), while the castes served are called *jajmans*. In exchange of such services, the *kamins* are paid in cash or in kind (grains, fodder, clothes, gifts and animal products like milk, butter, etc.). Renowned sociologist Yogender Singh describes the *jajmani* system as a system governed by relationship based on reciprocity in inter-caste relations in villages. It is a system in which each caste has a role to play in a community life as a whole. This role consists of economic, social and moral functions. The term *jajman* originally referred to the client for whom a Brahmin priest performs rituals, but later on it came to be referred to the patron or recipient of specialized services. There are also different names besides the term *kamin*—as *purjan*, *paradhan*, etc.

1.2.2 *Jajmani* Relations

The relationship between the *jajman* and *kamin* keeps changing time to time. Sometimes, the relations between two or more castes based on supplying a few things may only be contractual but not *jajmani*. For instance, the weaver who is paid in cash for what he makes and sells is not entitled to customary share of the harvest. He is not a *kamin* and the purchaser is not his *jajman*. Furthermore, in *jajmani* relations, there may be some products or services that may be contracted and paid for separately. For instance, the rope-makers in a village may supply farmers, under arrangements, all necessary ropes except the rope used in walls which is especially long and thick and for which special payment has to be made. The *jajmani* bonding involves ritualities and social support as well as economic exchanges. The servicing castes perform the ritual and ceremonial duties at the *jajman's* house on occasions like birth, marriage, and death. D.N. Majumdar, a famous ethnographer, has given the example of a Thakur family (of Rajput caste) in a village in Lucknow district in Utter Pradesh, which is served by as many as families of ten castes for the life cycle rites.

For example, at the time of childbirth, a Brahmin performs *Nam-Sanskarma* (giving a name) ceremony; *sunar* (goldsmith) gives the gold ornament for the new born, *dhobi* (washerman) washes soiled clothes, *nai* (barber) carries messages, *khati* (carpenter) provides a wooden stool) on which the child is seated for the ceremony, *lohar* (blacksmith) provides *kara* (iron bangle), *kumhar* (potter) provides *kulhar* (mugs) for keeping cooked vegetables and drinking water, *pasi* gives *patal* (leaf-plates) for

taking food, and *bhangi* (scavenger) cleans the place after the feast. All people who offer their help, receive gifts of food, money and clothes depending partly on custom, partly on *jajman*'s affluence, and partly on the recipient's entreaty.

The lower castes, who impart specialized skills and services to their high castes themselves, need goods and services of others. These *kamins* (lower castes) make their own *jajmani* arrangements either through direct exchange of their skills or by paying in cash or kind. Like the lower castes, the middle castes also subscribe to each other's services in return for compensations and payments in exchange of services with one another. The *kamins* provide their services for the *jajmans* preventing from pollute i.e., cutting of hair, washing of soiled clothes, delivery of the new-born, cleaning toilets, etc. These lower castes—*dhobis*, *nais*, *lohars*, etc.—do not serve as *kamins* to Harijans and Brahmins as their *jajmans*. As they (lower castes) prosper, they start discovering their polluting occupations and try to get ritual specialists to serve them.

The *jajmani* system has its roots in the castes, but their links are between families rather than castes. For example, a family of Rajputs obtains its metal tools from a particular family of the *lohar* (blacksmith) caste and not from all *lohar* families in the village. This same family of *lohar* is entitled to get a share of the Rajput family's crop at harvest and not other *lohar* (blacksmith) families. It resulted into the continuation of the relationship between the two families since the *lohar* (blacksmith) serves the same Rajput family that his father and grandfather served. Also, the Rajput family gets its tools and repairing work from the descendants of the same *lohar* family whose men used to make tools for their forefathers. If any skilled man of the families dies out, another of its lineage may take its place in the relationship. Thenceforth, there are families of village chowkidars or sweepers who maintain *jajmani* relations with the entire village rather than with particular family. The watchman or sweepers' families get grains at harvest time from every landowner farmer's family in the village. Sometimes, the village land is used by the village servants without any tax. There are service families who maintain *jajmani* relations with a segment of the village rather than individual families. Such families are having rights to serve all those who live in a particular section of the village.

There are certain questions which are to be analyzed in the context of *jajmani* system such as—What is the function of the system? What are the roles involved? What are its norms and values? Is *jajmani* system exploitative? What are the changes happened in this system? etc.

- Function of the system as Leach (1960) says that the *jajmani* system maintains and regulates division of labour and economic interdependence of castes. Beidelman (1959) is also of the opinion that it (*jajmani* system) maintains higher castes' prestige. This also to be taken into consideration, as Wiser says, that the *jajmani* system serves to maintain the Indian village as a self-sufficing community.

- The *jajmani* system involves the role of both the *jajmans* and *kamins*. There are certain occupational, economic, and social services offered by the *kamin* castes to the *jajman* castes for which the *kamins* are paid at fixed intervals or on specific occasions. Though there are *kamin* castes which are normally not involved in the exchange of service system. The dominant castes swing the balance of power in their favour in such relationship in many villages in India. It is clearly seen that the villages in India are changing faster in respect of economy, power structure, and inter-caste bonding.

- There are certain norms and values involved in the system. Each landowning farmer family gives some amount of food grains to various *kamins* as a traditional method of payment at the time of harvest. These harvest payments are the lone part of what the *kamin* family receives. The *kamin* may get some piece of land near *jajman's* house where his animals may graze, he may keep wood and cow-dung fuel, and so forth. In addition, the *kamin* may get some clothes and gifts on certain ceremonial occasions and sometimes he may get some money as well as a loan in emergencies. Roger V. Gould, an American sociologist, also found all these points valuable in *jajmani* bonding in his study of the *jajmani* system in Sherupur village in Faizabad district (UP) in 1954-55. There are many considerations which *kamins* get from the *jajmans*such as—free residence site, free food for family, free timber, free cow-dung, rent-free land, opportunity for supplementary employment, free funeral pyre lot, etc. Taking the *jajmani* relations with different castes, Gould also found that all *jajmans* in the village (Sherupur) gave 2,039 kilograms of grains in one year to all the *purjan* families. Further, he says that the grain income of one *kamin* family from all the *jajmans* in the 'serving villages' a *nai* (barber) got about 312 kilograms of grains in a year (1954-55) from fifteen joint families consisting of twenty-five nuclear units. This suggests the magnitude of the economic interaction involved.

  Suffice it to say that there are certain norms concerning duties, rights, payments and concessions for the *jajmans* and the *kamins*. The *jajman* is supposed to be paternalistic towards his *kamin* and fulfil their demands. Reciprocally, the *kamin* has also to behave like a son to his father. The *jajman* expects him to support in his factional disputes. The cultural value in the *jajmani* system is that generosity and charity are religious obligations and inequality is God-given. Hindu literature and oral traditions authorize and justify the *jajman–kamin* bonding.

- There is another question that should be analyzed in the context of *jajmani* system—Is *jajmani* system an exploitive one? Meagre quantity of food grains or a small amount of money to *kamins* makes them vulnerable to exploitation. We need explicitly to consider the *jajman* with 'exploiter' and the *kamin* with 'exploited', and the *jajmani* system is characterized as 'feudal'. The *jajmani* system is to be believed as one of the chief instruments of coercion, control and legitimisation wielded by high-caste landowning Hindu. Some intellectuals, sociologists, and ethnographers opine that there is no force or coercion involved in the *jajmani* system. The *kamins* are not totally dependent upon their *jajmans* for their livelihood. They can sell their goods freely and provide services to other individuals and families who pay them cash. In case they feel that injustice has been done to them, they can appeal to their caste panchayats which force the *jajmans* to accept the demands of their *kamins*. Similarly, when landowner *jajmans* feel that one of their *kamins* disobeying the power and status of the landowners, the *jajman* (patron) families can put collective pressure on them by taking payment back or by some other way. However, caste solidarity prevails over loyalties to *jajmani* associates. Despite this, there are minimum standards which are to be maintained at any given time in each *jajman* relations. As the *jajmani* system is mutually beneficial, the *jajmans* bear the occasional irrelevant demands of their *kamins* just as

the *kamins* tolerate the occasional coercion of their *jajmans*. In this context the *jajmani* system cannot be an exploitative one.

The relationship between the *jajmans* and the *kamins* (servicing castes) is a sort of enjoyment of a common religious–economic relationship and not enjoyment of a common relationship to the sources of wealth and power in society. It is further asserted that in the *jajmani* system, the *jajmans* status neither coincides with a landlord class, a dominant caste or the like nor does it depend upon membership in any particular social group, but upon the possession of land, or access to the produce from land by whatever means. As Gould says that *jajman* status refers to a religious–economic category rather than a social stratum, it may be said that *jajmans* cannot be perceived as exploiters (as a social class). Simultaneously, the *jajman's* status was never restricted merely to landed aristocracy. Different caste people had the opportunity to be *jajmans*. But it is equally true that being a *jajman* and being part of the currently dominant political order were not spontaneously coterminous.

- Next comes—what are the changes happened in *jajmani* system? There are many factors behind the fact that the *jajmani* system has been largely supplanted in villages in recent decades. Changes in the rigidity of the caste system, coming up of factories and industries, spread of education, migration of people of mostly lower castes to cities in search of jobs and material amenities, new land reforms, avoiding of stigma (in case of some people or castes), better employment in urban areas, etc. are the changes in society which have affected the deeply rooted *jajmani* system. The artisans prefer to get cash instead of food grains for their products. The landowner prefers to buy quality products from the market of a city. The dominant castes seek for other options rather than depending on their *kamins.* There is no denying the fact that the *jajmani* system has been very much weakened in recent times. Not much of the village economy is now carried on through *jajmani* arrangement.

1.3 *JOGI* AND *MIRASI* (AS MINSTRELS) CASTES

The *jogi* caste is from Hindu community found in North India. They have claimed to have worn a sacred thread on their bodies. They have claimed to be the descendants of the mendicants of India called *jogi* as *sadhus* and *rishis*. "The four varna (castes) are perceived to be located in the nature of the individual, i.e., Brahman in *sadacara* (righteous conduct), Ksatriya is *saurya* (valour and courage), Vaisya in *vyavasaya* (business), and Sudra in *seva* (service). A yogin experiences men and women of all races and castes within himself. Therefore, he has no hatred for anybody. He has love for every being."—Gorakhanath, *Siddha Siddhanta Paddhati* III. 6-8 (Translator: D. Shastri). The word *jogi* has been borrowed from the Sanskrit word *yoga*. The *jogi* caste has its description and origin in *Shiva Purana*. Colloquially, the word *yogi* refers to the people who practice *yoga* as part of their rituals. With the passage of time, this emerged into a community and subsequent castes.

There is another perception as well that the *jogis* are the descendants of the *dum* (traditionally basket-makers, labourers and drummers). They are best known in Punjab as hereditary bards and minstrels. As the descendants of the *dum*, they come in (fall in)

a sub-caste and make an important community in Punjab. They may be the closest "equivalent", in the contemporary Punjab, to the erstwhile *dum*. They have been Hindu community with origins in the north-central Punjab and the surrounding hills; Sialkot and Jammu are centers of diffusion. The pejorative term *dum* is rarely used. The bards and minstrel that appear to be from the larger *dum* stock are currently divided into two major separate communities: *jogi* and *mirasi*. The *jogis* have been known as "gurus", both in musical arts and religious life.

The reason behind their group name *jogi* is shrouded in obscurity. This is certainty of one-thing that it designates an endogamous ethnic community, not a haphazard conglomeration of ascetics. However, in a time where music performance was more restricted to certain segments of society, *faqirs or jogis*—in broad sense—were indeed associated with ballad-singing and playing of the *tumba* (gourd lute). Similarly, members from the *jogi* caste of Punjab tell how their ancestors were once expert at singing ballads (*katha*). These people were based in the hill regions on the northern side of Punjab, popularly conceived as the "abode of the Gods." The hills are rich in powerful Hindu sites (e.g., Vaishno Devi temple near Jammu, and the *jogis* there had been facilitators to rituals at temples and at homes. In this way, we might understand the transformation of part of this community by (*Jogi* caste) into the present image suggested by their activities. Moreover, *jogi* is a more respectful term than with the low-status connotations of *dum*. Bal Kishan of Jammu (the interviewee—in his office in Jammu Cantonment, 2005) informs that his people used to sing and play all sorts of instruments. He describes his own skills extend from *dhol* (large barrel drum) to table and *pakhavaj* (cylindrical) drums, along with the double-reed aeroplane *bin*. Interestingly, he referred to his people as *ustad lok* or *guru lok* ("teacher-people"), reinforcing the inadequacy of both the euphemistic *jogi* and the vulgar *dum*. Over the time, the *jogi* people filtered down from Jammu into Punjab, into the nearby district of Gurdaspur. One of the largest communities of dhol-players to serve east Punjab is located in Ludhiana city, and they are rarely of *jogi* background. *Jogis* also have a presence in Ambala, Haryana.

Other caste that comes in the same category is *mirasi*. The *mirasi* is perhaps most accurately characterized as an occupational label. They have been professional musicians in north India since medieval times. A clearer explanation might be to say that, for the ethnic groups to which the term is most often applied, *mirasi* is little more than an occupational label. The people who constitute the ethnic communities from which these performers come may accept or reject the *mirasi* label if and when it suits them, while maintaining a more accurate, insider's sense of who their people are. For outsiders to the community, the term is both an (overused) occupational label and an ethnic label.

As far as the *mirasi* term is concerned, it comes from the Arabic *mirath*—means inheritance or sometimes heritage (Randhawa166). But the term is not self-evident in what sense "inheritance" should be interpreted. It may denote specifically to the role of *mirasis* as personal bards and genealogies. Some *mirasis* have been charged with preserving the genealogies and historical events of specific clans, which they may recite on occasions such as the birth of a son, a wedding, or a funeral. In this respect, in medieval and colonial times, they served a function analogous to the *griot* in West Africa, or the piper and harpist to Scottish clans. Moreover, in practice, the label of *mirasi* is used to denote, first and foremost, a *hereditary* professional musician. They are often known by more occupation specific names such as Qawwal (a Sufi devotional singer) or Nagarchi (a player of kettledrum, *nagarah*). The hereditary nature of these occupations is, arguably, what binds them. So, despite the general occupational nature

of the term, it also has an ethnic dimension. There is evidence that the *mirasi* communities—they are perhaps best thought of in the plural—emerged from within another heterogeneous group, the *dum*. Sometimes the hyphenated label *dum-mirasi* is still used. Guru Nanak's minstrel, Bhai Mardana, is said to have been a *mirasi* according to Bhai Gurdas (early 17th century). The minstrels—Satta and Rai Balvand (brothers), in the courts of Guru Nanak's successors, were said to have come from the Dum community.

The *mirasis* are converts to Islam from Hindus like the *dum* who, upon conversion, kept their profession, but adopted a new identity and kinship practices on religious grounds. This new identity gave a better social status than the *dum*, with whom the *mirasi* subsequently avoided associating. In fact, the name *mirasi* has acquired some connotations of greater or milder contempt, especially in Pakistan. Some *Mirasis* in West Punjab call themselves *kasbi*, Persian for "one who works" (Nayyar 2000: 763). Others generally prefer the fancy label *mir alam* ("lord of the world"), and to be addressed as *mir* ("chief"). Based on ethnographic information, *mirasi* may be associated with Bhai Mardana (1516-1591) the Muslim minstrel who accompanied Guru Nanak on the *rabab*, a plucked lute of the north western areas of Malerkotla, Punjab. They are proud to be associated with the Sikh tradition, with which they are highly familiar. The Mardanas had historically been singers and players of the *rabab* and *sarangi*. That is why they (*mirasi*) regard themselves as superior to other*mirasi*groups. There are other groups—*bhand* (who serve the *Valmiki* and *Mazhbi* communities) called *Balmiki Mirasi* (K.S. Singh, 1998: 2299); and *mirasi* consists of performers known as *Naqqalie* or *Naqqal*. However, the terms *bhand* and *naqqalia* are often said to be synonymous.

Mirasis in East Punjab can be found as players of just about any instrument and as singers of any entertainment genre of song. Whatever performance skill they practice, they are usually subject to the most rigorous of training. They have been major players in the development of Hindustani classical music, especially as instrumentalists on the *sarangi* and *tabla*. Neuman, an ethnomusicologist, finds that by around the 1870s, the *mirasis* had begun to take the place of an earlier historically-mentioned performer community, the *dhadi*, in the capacity of court musicians (Neuman 130), who had been established in that role since at least Akbar's time. As paid praise-singers, *mirasi* were expected to extol the virtues of an individual's family line. As they had the knowledge of family's history, they had the power to present that history as less than favourable if they were not duly compensated. In colonial times, a *mirasi* would construct a cloth effigy of his non-patron, attach it a top a pole, and parade it through the village (Rose 109).

Mirasans (*mirasi* women) are distinguished as professionals in their own right. They are singers performing at various life-cycle events. As an instance, on the sixth day of a boy child's life or some convenient time within the year thereafter, a ritual called *chhati* is performed. The *Mirasan*, playing the small barrel drum *dholki*, leads in singing wedding songs and dancing (N. Kaur 32). One of the most important functions of the *mirasin* is to lead the women's songs (*alohunian*) of group mourning that follow a person's death. The *mirasi*—both women and men—used to perform the function of intermediary of their patrons. Known as a *lagi*, after the customary dues (*lag*) to which he or she is entitled for his services, the traditional intermediary in life-cycle rituals was usually a priest, a barber, or a *mirasi*. In a wedding, for instance, the *lagi* would hand the *shagun* (monetary donations) to the groom. At the times of these small

services, the *lagi* received a small amount of cash. They are supposed to entertain for the male guests of both the bride and groom's houses a day before the marriage takes place.

During the tumult of Partition, most *mirasis* left East Punjab. This historical event was important in shaping the modern make up of musicians in East Punjab. A number of *mirasi* minstrels are regulars at the shrine of saint Hazrat Haider Shaikh in Malerkotla, Punjab. They are *mirasi* dhol-players who earn tips playing at the shrine on Thursdays. In addition to also playing table and various instruments in a wedding band, they sing *qawwali* at shrines. Professionally, they are experts in many types of music. There are many ethnic categories, i.e., *dhadi*, *bharai*, *mazhbi*, *musalli*—all are performer communities and all have come from a variety of castes and religious backgrounds. Thus, Lybarger has used *mirasi* term both generically as an occupational term for most hereditary musicians of West Punjab while at the same time it is ascribed to or claimed by one or more specific ethnic communities.

1.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we discussed folklore as synonymous with the expression of consciousness of the larger mass of the society. We have, though it is difficult task, tried to put folklore and caste of India as a unit. In specific reference to caste, we have highlighted the *jajmani* system which has its deep roots in the caste system. The special description of *jogi* and *mirasi* (as minstrels) castes in the unit has made the study relevant. Moreover, we have seen caste-based occupations which are the integral part of our rural society. Despite various diversities in our society, the *jajmani* system and caste system have been remained intact rungs of our social fiber. The present study would grant us a vista to explore and know more about folklore and caste in our social structure.

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1.6 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What do you understand by the term 'folklore'?

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2. Enumerate the differences between caste and *varna* system.

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3. Explain the concept and functions of *jajmani* system.

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4. Describe the *jajmani* relations within the *jajmani* system.

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5. What are certain norms and values involved in the *jajmani* system?

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6. Is *jajmani* system exploitative? Give your views.

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7. What are the general changes we see in *jajmani* system in recent times?

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8. Write a brief note on the relationship between the *jajmans* and the *kamins* in the *jajmani* system.

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9. Illustrate *jogi* caste as an endogamous ethnic community.

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10. How do you demonstrate *mirasi* caste as minstrels?

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UNIT 2 FOLKLORE AND GENDER

Structure

2.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading the unit you will be able to:

- Understand the construction of gender within the socio-historical and cultural context of India;
- Comprehend what is the construction of self-identity in gender;
- Follow the principles of feminist ethnography while studying folklore and look at self-reflexivity (the outsider and insider model);
- Look at the history behind the lived experiences of women in Indian folklore, especially from the Middle Ages of India to modern period;
- Define and construct the idea of transgender (hijra community) in Indian culture;
- Look at the multiple ways in which gender functions within performative folklore and folklife (theatre and music)
- Understand folklore and the interaction of woman in popular cinema of India, specifically in Bollywood movies
- Analyse folklore and folk life in a globalized India with special reference to women in it

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Folklore is a particularly important part of "lived culture" within the tradition, heritage and the history of any community of a nation. While this provides the framework in which the culture of the community is built, we cannot negate that folklore is alive and comes to life almost every day through our folk songs, riddles, literature, dance, drama, tales and even gossip. The folklore hence is extremely specific to a community, and the members of the community accordingly play an important role in it. Going further from this premise, we need to consider the members of the community in specific terms, the gender, age, region, caste, economic demographics, and career choices of the members. Consequently, gender plays a vital role in determining how folklore and folk life is constructed within a complex mosaic of culture. This unit will consider, analyse, re-examine and construct the ways in which gender plays its own multiplex roles within the dynamic, and fluid composite of folklore and folk life of India in specific terms.

2.1.1 Definition of Folklore with References to Gender

Before we deeply look at the way gender aggregates within folklife, it is important to define what we understand by folklore and folklife. The definition of folklore has so far been very loose, vague and not well defined, it ranges from being seen as oral literature that is not documented or as performances that are performed by the common people or the folk. The word folklore was coined by Thoms who was the first scholar to see folklore embracing everything pertaining to culture and heritage, customs, traditions, notions, superstitions, etc. Hence, it has to do with the entire people or common man. Alan Dundes, an outstanding scholar, sees folklore as a part of modern living and lifestyle adapting to it and therefore it's not restraining. Often, folklore upsets power relations, and furthermore, as Dundes describes, folklore should be seen as the way the people think about themselves, human actions hence being materialized and often internal. D.K. Bhattacharya emphasises that there is a great need for a separate discipline of folklore to be created; he says that one must completely understand the cultural context rather than just the literary structure of folklore. Marta Weigle and Claire Farmer were among the early folklorists who sought to understand the woman's point of view, and, as early as 1888, it was recognised by Richard A. Ruess that women's issues have been neglected in folklore. As Ben Amos understands, folklore must be seen within the social context. One cannot neglect the multiple ways in which gender functions in folklore. Since identity is the foundation of gender, let us first define that before determining the ways it functions in folk culture.

2.1.2 The Construction of Gender and Interest in Women's Studies in Culture and Folklife

One needs to understand how smaller groups and the specific identities within it function in folk tradition. While in general, folklore is deeply connected to the larger society and tradition, it is important to understand how the identity of a particular community or group functions within the larger whole. It is important to acknowledge how folklore is changed or retained by smaller groups and how traditions are diffused and spread out or altered. Gary Fine determines how "personal influences" can make us construct the cultural milieu of the common community at large. Fine says that one must look at actions arising within the group. In her discussion of gender in the book *The Second Sex* (1949), the French author Simone De Beauvoir determines that women are not

born, it is not biological but created by society, hence there is massive difference between sex and gender.

As explained by John Tooby and Leda Cosmides (The Psychological Foundations of Culture), when we look at individuals, we must remember that collective representations are not just caused by the certain collective states of consciousness, but by the social conditions in which the entire group is placed. Consequently, social factors can transform and mould the individual. The primary concern of this unit is on the image of gender in folklore and the extent to which it changes perceptions or attitudes in society. While determining so, the women's role in different spaces will be seen, that is, at home and in women-centric performances of folklore and of women's creativity in folk arts will be examined, and whether it creates a separate genre in the study of folklore will be further examined. While doing so, it would be correct to assume a Foucauldian insight and model of productive power (power working in complex ways) can explain the formation of an "impure subject" (Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 93-94). For instance, we can examine gender relations and the power relationships between them using this insight. The model, therefore, can explain how gender has been reconceptualized in India and how the questions of agency operate in creating a new social, political, cultural, and aesthetic fabric of India.

2.2 CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER FROM ANCIENT INDIA TO THE MODERN PERIOD WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO FOLKLORE

We have already determined in the above section how Indian women must be considered within the complex intersections of sex, gender, family, community, religion within the nation that further strongly defines the individual self of the female. Indian feminists, like Kumkum Sangari recognize that Indian women are positioned in complex ways; she argues that female identities should not be seen in terms of a "single unified axis" (871). When we look at the construction of gender in folklore in India from the ancient period, we can see that feminine voices were privileged. The concept of the mother goddess in Hinduism can be a "persistent disturbing presence" (Kamala Ganesh 65) as Hinduism places emphasis on the destructive and creative power of the female goddesses. Ania Loomba goes further from this and propoundsthat the female is a strong agent of the Hindu tradition, hence she must be written "more than victim" in culture and folklore studies.

Accordingly, we cannot negate that many goddesses are worshipped, venerated and kept in an exalted position, defining their esteem in several folktales, popular myth and religion. For example, in ancient India, we see the image of Radha Krishna and Shaktism made the veneration of women strong. From the ancient times, we can see the powerful impact of sages such as Gargi and Maitreyee. When we look at the rituals of India, like the marriage ceremony, matriarchal elements abound in it. In tribal practices in regions of Malabar and north east India, even today, we can see that matrilineal tradition is carried forward. During the medieval period,within the Chaitanya cult of the Vaishnava tradition, women were particularly important. In south India, we have the prominent deity of the villages. In Dravidian tales, we see warrior queens like Minarsi (the Pandian queen) are given the status of deities. Rainmaking rites were carried out by women in Bengal (Koch tribes). Resistance to the Muslim invaders is narrated in *Prithvi Raj Raso* by Chand Bardai. In the 12th century, we also see the literature of Jayadeva's

Gita Govinda. Some of the Tamil Alvar and Nayannar poets were also women like Ammaiyar and Andal. Attukuri Molla was a Telugu poetess who wrote the Ramayana. Kanhopatra who was a *devadasi* devoted herself to the god Vitobha and sang songs in his praise much against the wishes of her father and was eventually killed.

Colonial domination of the British changed the context of women in folklore dramatically. However, the extension and participation of women in nationalist movements, helped to decolonize colonial domination, as they challenged the "paternalistic" attitude of the British towards Indian women. The new Indian national identity for women described as "Mother India" (*Bharat Mata*) helped to create a new context for colonized India. Casting Indian women as "Mother India" or emphasizing women as carriers of continuity and tradition can help us to engage in new readings about the identity of women in post-colonial India. Some feminists like Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana reject this model of "Mother India" and argue that one needs to capture the ways in which the apparently stable category of "women", which covers caste, class and community differences and how self-identity of women helps to change and reverse power structures in gender roles.

While some of the arguments of Tharu and Niranjana may be valid, especially if one looks at individual female selves, we cannot ignore the complexities of Indian tradition having its distinctive structures of family, class, caste, community and religion. Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan argues that the construct of the new Indian woman should be in the appearance of the individual women's achievement that comfortably fits with a tradition preserved in the family, kinship, community and religion of India.

The Indian woman preserves family, kinship norms of conjugality and traditional and religious values of being the essentially preserver. At the same time, she keeps her individuality alive. At present, the growth of a woman in this multicultural, multilingual and multicultural social-scape has uplifted the woman in particular and in specific terms the middle and upper class. Most Indian feminists therefore recognize this sense of collective identity.

The Indian women should thus be seen in relationships between the individual selves and the collective identities of females. The interactions between the selves of the females within their homes, communities and kinship and within multiple layers of caste, class and religion working along regional and national lines should be recognized. The complexities and multiplicities in Indian culture define the construct of new women in the 21st century. This gets strongly seen in the context of folklife of Indian communities today.

Let us examine this case study to make our point clearer. Chhau becomes one excellent case study to examine the role of women in performance as well within the specificities of the socio-cultural political region of Seraikela, Kharsawan and Mayurbhanj. A traditional all-male, semi-folk dance of eastern India, Chhau, as a performance by women from the 1980s indicates the porous nature of performance today. It redefines women in "folk" performance and sees them in action as performers not only within the auditorium, but also in her home, troupe and her community. By performing in this traditional "all male" martial art-based folk form,it shows the female as having a strong self-image.

Hence it becomes important for us to consider feminist ethnography (the method we must study folklore in society through female eyes) when we study any form of folk culture. This will be studied in detail in the next section.

2.2.1 Feminist Ethnography and Self-Reflexivity in Folklore Studies

As we have seen, folklore is "everyday practices" (Bronner, *Practice Theory in Folklore and Folklore Studies*, 2012), which can be overlooked or interpreted differently. For that reason, a scholar studying folklore has to understand that ethnography, or the scientific study of culture, can be half-informed, as Clifford Geertz sees as "half-truths". Kamala Visveswaran sees that the scholar most importantly needs to be concerned about her subject and consider and reevaluate all the assumptions around it through direct observation. The process of observation hence is extremely important, and one needs to maintain "testimonial ethics" as Lyotard describes, although "about the conditions of possibility of hearing" (Ahmad, Sara, 157), it must be seen and noted carefully. Hence, the ethnographer has to look at both the verbal and nonverbal language expressed by the subject of concern. According to N. Chandramouli, a communications expert, "Language is an instrument of persuasion that allows the transmission of influence of beliefs, attitudes, intentions and behaviours onto others" (*Decoding Communications*, 22).

So, it becomes important for the "outsider" observer to become a keen "insider" without challenging or upsetting mores and traditional models of observation and use the "instrument of persuasion". Sometimes being an insider provides a great scope and insight, as Bonner and Tolhurst have pointed out in their book *Insider-Outsider Perspectives to Participant Observation* (2002) that there are three key advantages being an insider to the research domain——firstly, a superior understanding of the group's culture, secondly an ability to naturally interact with the members of the group, and thirdly creating an interpersonal intimacy. Often, the problems that one faces is that enough data cannot be acquired from the field as an outsider, and often one must re-read the field notes as that appear vague and inadequate for research purposes outside the field, on the first reading.

Pugh, Michelle and Brooks (2000) have suggested that a research partnership between the insider/outsider research can balance both the advantages of both the positions of the insider as well as the outsider. The complexities of insider research hence had its own norms and one of them is that of ethics and respect. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith points out,

> As non-indigenous experts have claimed considerable acceptability amongst their own colleagues and peers, government officials and society on the basis of their research, indigenous voices have been silenced or 'Othered' in the process. (Smith, 139)

One must however look at the larger factors that come under the entire gamut of the subject of study. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty describes, the "third world woman" should not be seen as a singular entity. So, when we look at the aesthetics of folklore, it is important to consider the power of aesthetic resistance (Manu Chakraborthy, 96) that demolishes "dominant cultural frames" that must be noted by the scholar studying gender in folklore. Hence the next section will examine ways gender functions in folkloric performances with specific examples from Indian folklore.

2.3 GENDER IN FOLKLORIC PERFORMANCES OF INDIA

We have understood that folklore is fluid and dynamic and is not contained or bounded. It is very much a part of the rich public culture of India or is the 'the public

modernity' that is both contemporary and new. While keeping the conventions of traditions totally alive and vibrant in the performance mode,the new is also maintained. The performances, going further from this premise, is that folk culture should be described as a part of national culture that seeks to co-opt and redefine the local, regional and the folk cultural forms. We must understand that the way the folklore is performed which further has a strong resonance in the cultural language and idiom of the nation.

Hence, the human body in action, or the body in performance, within folklore is pivotal to understand when we study gender in the genres of folk culture. Foucault talks in detail about this body in action, "the body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas) ... the performing body can also express place and narrative through skilful mime and/or body movement" (*Body Politics*, 203). Consequently, the means through which gender acts or its agency within folklore impacts the establishment of gender in the cultural traditional practices. In the words of Wimal Dissanayake, "The recuperation of human agency then has both theoretical interests and practical political consequences of great import. What is urgently needed is a theory of agency that recognizes that agents are shaped irreducibly by social and cultural discourses and that they have the potentiality to clear cultural spaces from which they could act in accordance with their desires and intentionality" (xvi).

Going further from the above hypothesis, Donna Haraway draws our attention to "affinity politics" rather than identity politics; what she means here is that the females must consider forming coalitions based on their experiences of cultural practices. To categorize and delineate any performance as being folk, traditional, or modern would be simply dispensing them off that can endanger our readings and interpretations for it. All performances display set codes and conventions; it can be said as one having a "traditional process" as pointed out by Brynjulf Alver (47).While it is true that folklore is a traditional process, it is time to go beyond the 'folk' or the common and reconsider folk forms as an "ongoing concern of contemporary life" (Steve Tillis, 35).

We need to accordingly look at the female body in folk performances from the classical times. The traditions of India are divided into the *lokadharmi* (the popular), the folk, for example includes Nautanki of Punjab and Swang of Himachal Pradesh, folk tales, folk dances and songs; and the *natyadharmi* (the traditional), the classical, based on ancient texts (*Natyashastra*), like the Bharatanatyam, Carnatic music and Odissi. Several characteristics delineate the classical and the folk. The classical performances of India are based on a set of codified laws, such as those of the *Natyashastra*, but at the same time are "open" to interpretation. The *Natyashastra* (800 A.D.) is an ancient Indian treatise on drama, written in Sanskrit that is the foundation for not just the classical dances, but also most of the theatrical dance forms prevalent in the country such as Kuttiyatam of Kerala, Ankiya Nat of Assam, Ramlila and Raslila of Uttar Pradesh, Terukootu of Tamil Nadu, and Chhau of Eastern India.

Women have always been performers in India since ancient times. Looking at archeological evidence, sculptural depictions in temples, paintings and early dramatic literature like the *Kamasutra* (800 A.D.), many scholars tend to believe that the female performers had a high social standing in ancient Indian society (3000 B.C. to 1200 A.D.). However, the correspondence between these representations and its extension to "real" women can be argued.For e.g., the famous *Khajuraho* caves in Chhatarpur district, Madhya Pradesh (800 A.D. to 1200 A. D.) depict females playing percussive instruments that later remained in the exclusive domains of the men.We can argue that perhaps these female performers (as shown in the statues) were courtesans, and it was

their profession that allowed them to have access to display certain creative skills. The *Kamasutra*, written by Vatsayana, describes the skills of the courtesan, who was to be well versed in the act of love and pleasure but also needed to be equally well versed in music, dance, drama, and painting.

Sanskrit Drama, that flourished from the 2nd century BC, had a plethora of female characters. The female character was not only accepted, but she was a major part of the society and given much social respect. According to the *Natyashastra*, the treatise on music, dance and drama, if there is no companionship between men and womenand there is no love, a society cannot grow and prosper. However, we must note that women as mothers or sisters are hardly discussed in the *Natyashastra*, it is always about the charismatic heroine.

This enticing heroine's antecedents can be traced back to antiquity. Statues of the Indus Valley civilization (3000-1500 B.C.) show strong associations with music and dance. A bronze figurine of a dancing girl was unearthed in the ruins of Mohenjo Daro (northern India) that show the popularity of performing arts in the Indus Valley. The figurine has been found in association with many statues of goddesses that indicates that dancing and music must have had close associations with worship and therefore making it popular.Although female worship was considered pure and divine during the Indus Valley Civilization, we must keep in mind the paradoxical situation of female performers in later ages from the 5th or 6th century B.C. onwards.

This inconsistency can be seen in other areas of worship as well, even though female worship is an essential part of the religion of India; females are still in some isolated cases "dedicated to temples" who are called the *devadasis*. These *devadasis* traditionally were the courtesans and the dancing girls. Some of these women had a low social status and became victims of prostitution. The British could not really distinguish the girls from those who danced on the streets.

Grace Thompson Seton, a British woman, who travelled in India during the early 19th century remarks on the life of the "nautch" girls. Written in the early 19th century, this quote shows that dancing was relegated to low class women, wearing "diaphanous clothes", supporting their families through their incomes from in prostitution or "entertaining" the high-ranking officials of the court, their actions being controlled by the kings (Maharaja). The king clearly treated the women as possessions since these women were "loaned".

The *devadasis* were a part of the highbrow culture of the south, and it was under the British rule that a call was made to abolish this system by Ranade, Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar and C.N. Annadurai. Only low-class women traditionally performed some classical theatrical forms of India for example *Bharatanatyam* and *Kuchipudi*, two major southern Indian dance dramas. Their primary duty was not only to perform in the temples as dancing girls, but they could also supplement their family income by serving as prostitutes. However, these women had a high status in society in later decades, many of the *devadasis* married rich men, as in the cases of Ms Subbalaxmi and Kisori Amorkar

Many folk dramatic forms have had the traditional exclusion of females, and only few forms like the Lavani and Tamasha of Western India and Nautanki of northern India have included women. These dramatic forms often use camaraderie and sexual innuendos; therefore, the female performers of such forms do not have high social standing. Therefore, these performances are often "popular entertainment" and quite

often religious themes are not depicted. Thus, with very few exceptions, women were effectively banned from theatrical stage, whether rural or urban, folk or classical. A striking instance of the extensiveness of this ban can be seen in Kathakali, an all-male form folk dance drama of south India. Wade observes, Kathakali was developed in Kerala, on the southwestern edges of the subcontinent, in a region that is traditionally matriarchal and in which women are influential in public affairs and have a reputation for considerable degrees of freedom in society in general. Yet even in this area, so deeply had the ban on women penetrated that *Kathakali* had been, and remains, an all-male form. (Wade 12)

Some folk forms of India like the Lavani and the Tamasha of Maharashtra and many ritual songs such as those on wedding and childbirth are meant purely for the entertainment of people. These use strong sexual innuendos as a theme that makes it immensely popular. Some of the performances such as Nautanki and Tamasha are held in the night and employ the use of secular songs and dances. The women performers are not given high social value and esteem, and many women are discouraged to participate as performers. Many of the performers also come from traditional low classes.

However, we must keep in mind that women in folk performances are not mute or kept in the fringes, while folklore based on mythology and religion upholds the values of an ideal woman like Sati, Savitri or Sita.The women in folk performances use multiple ways in which they construct their strong selfhood. This can be firmly established by considering the female folk performers in the case studies below.

2.4 CASE STUDY: TEEJAN BAI (PANDAVANI SINGER)

Teejan Bai's early life started as a child born to an illiterate and extremely poor family with five children in Chhattisgarh. She was musically inclined since her childhood and was constantly rebuked by the elders in her household for her interest in learning Pandavani from her grandfather. Pandavani is the folk narration of the epic Mahabharata in which Bhima plays the central character. As generationally this was performed by the males, Teejan Bai's choice to learn and perform this folk form did not find any encouragement from her family or community to which she belonged. Her talent was noticed by Habib Tanvir (a theatre director deeply interested in folk traditions of India) who made her performance get noticed by important dignitaries like Indira Gandhi. She has made such a major impact by her performative skills that she was not only awarded the Padma Shri in 1987, the Padma Bhushan in 2003, was ultimately honoured by the second highest civilian award by the president of India—Padma Vibhushan—in 2019.

2.5 CASE STUDY: GODAVARI DUTTA (MADHUBANI ARTIST)

The 80-year-old energetic Madhubani folk artist, Godavari Dutta, is so well known for preserving and carrying the folk art of Bihar forward that she was awarded the Padma Shri in 2019. This folk painting is traditionally done by women, mothers teaching this skill to their daughters. Godavari has taught her skill to more than 50,000 people and has formed a society to help and support other Mithila artists.

2.6 CASE STUDY: FEMALE PERFORMERS OF SERAIKELA AND MAYURBHANJ CHHAU FROM THE 1980S

Chhau, involving basic martial art technique, is performed traditionally by males belonging to the three contiguous states of Jharkhand (Seraikela), Odisha (Mayurbhanj/Baripada) and West Bengal (Purulia). While these three forms have the same basic stances, modes of expression and expressive symbols, there are some differences between the three forms.

Mayurbhanj Chhau. Picture courtesy: Dancer Ms. Carolina Prada

Chhau also had placed restrictions on women as performers. The origins of Chhau can best describe the lack of any female participants in the early years and their denial as performers. From the 1980s, middle-class women all over India have been participating in Chhau and making it immensely popular. Tripti Bari, one of the female artists that I interviewed in 2002, talked about her self-awareness while she watched the *Chhau* performance for the first time, "when I saw the *Chhau* dance being done at the *Chaitra Parva* for the first time, the whirling movements and jumps of the male dancers excited me. I thought to myself—If they can do it, why can't I? This made me resolve to learn this form." Arundhati Nakay, a twenty-five-year-old artist at Baripada another artist remarked, "I know that I might not be able to perform *Chhau* after my marriage, as I might not be permitted to do so at my in-laws house. The only solution I see is that I get married to another artist. We must make an important point to note that the present king, Aditya Pratap Deo, and his wife Arunima Singh Deo of Seraikela, and the king Prabir Kumar Singh Deo of Mayurbhanj have left no stone unturned to help both the local and international female artists to promote the form. When we look at families that have supported traditional art forms, the role and the participation of the female become worthy. First, the queen herself looks at all the backstage, supporting and enabling the public activities of the form; and secondly, she also takes the patriarchal pride in the family name and brings in more and more women to the forefront. We accordingly have determined the way gender performs within the different genres of

folklore as well as the historiography of the participation of women in folklore with a special reference to folk culture.

Going further, we must understand that gender is placed in a large global neoliberal space. Folk culture consequently is also placed within this larger context. The next section will look at the factors that are influencing the way gender interacts within the cultural idioms.

2.7 FOLKLORE AND GENDER WITHIN GLOBALIZED INDIA

Often, the performance tries to amalgamate technology like the use of the Web and television broadcasting and is a 'cultural commodity'. Therefore, this performance itself is deemed fit for consumption. Bourdieu is of the opinion that a perception of consumption is an identity marker. Culture often accordingly is based on individual preferences and cannot be contained and codified. It is large and can soak in the participation of people beyond the region it belongs to. We can see this by the participation of foreign nationals as far as Columbia and Japan in Chhau.

It is also important to remember that female performers in India today are placed in an economy that is a largely neoliberal space, indicative of heavy urbanization, lavish lifestyle and migration of the rural populace to urban towns and cities. Gender equality and education is important. It is important to see culture as sometimes "just one more vehicle to mobilize capital for the corporate world" (V. Sharma, *Performance and Affect in Neoliberal Times*, 230). It no longer belongs to the "bounded or homogenous cultural groups or territories due to technological change and global capitalism" (Pallavi Chakraborthy, 178). It is a part of the rich public culture of India or is the 'the public modernity' that is both contemporary and new. This performance can be described as a national culture that seeks to co-opt and redefine the local, regional and the folk cultural forms. With the wake of commercialization, folk forms are now going beyond simple categories and are becoming much more complex in their nature of representation. As correctly observed by Appadurai,

> Commercial culture (especially in the cinema, television and audio industry) seeks to popularize classical forms. Mass cultural forms seek to co-opt folk idioms. This zone of contestation and mutual cannibalization in which national, mass and folk provide both mill and grist for one another-is the very heart of public modernity in India. (Appadurai and Breckenridge 50).

The category of the form being truly 'folk' is thus problematic as its recreation and representation must be further seen in the wake of globalization and modernization. Folk arts have to be seen in the wake of "commercial possibilities inherent in the new media" (Appadurai, 472). The next section will examine the portrayal of gender in media with a special reference to Hindi movies.

2.8 PORTRAYAL OF GENDERED FOLK MOTIFS IN HINDI FILMS

Often filmmakers make their films for cultural revivals and use folk motifs in their narration. We first need to see films as a part of a storytelling practice as Stith Thompson, Gerald Thomas sees soap operas as a part of storytelling. Sharon Sherman sees the

films that are ethnographic in content as also folkloric films. Mikel Koven urges for "motif spotting"(*Folklore and Popular Film and Television*, 181) in films. Attending films or watching soap operas in India is like going for a picnic or attending a grand wedding. Films evoke both mythological and folklore themes for example in the song "*dhiashyamrok le aur aurachakamuhka chum le*" by the evergreen Bollywood actor Madhuri Dikshit in the film *Devdas*, directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, the epithets of the Hindu deity Krishna and the folklore associated with it is totally clear. In the film *Lamhe*, the popular Sridevi dances the Rajasthani folk dance with folk singers in the background crooning "*morni baga main boliaadhiraat ma*". In the film *Mother India*, the female protagonist, Nutan is like Durga, who by killing her own son as he kidnaps a woman, brings justice to the world.

Cultural epithets and conventions could also be considered as the resources for films. Stories and films onthe Partition are about memory and a sense of loss, and are therefore sometimes not "forward looking" (Rosemary George, *Extraordinary Violence National Literatures*, 144). As A.K. Ramanujam examines folklore in his essay "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?", Peter Lutgendorf establishes that Indian cinema is totally different in his essay, "Is There an Indian Way of Filmmaking?" He sees the influence coming from the Parsi style of drama. We can see how everyday speech particular to the city of Mumbai in *Munna Bhai MBBS* is defined. The genres, plots within plots in Indian films are distinctly Indian. Colonialism also has its own cultural context, in the Oscar-nominated film *Lagaan* where we can see how neoliberal, postcolonial and globalization have been cleverly integrated in the film as the plot is centrally about a game of cricket between the British and the native Indian villagers in the 19th century. Hence, it is totally true that in order to understand any folk drama and the "social context" (Ben Amos) of the Indian films, we must determine how the women are portrayed in folklore used by the media? Folklore is used to condition women's behaviour. Some urban legends may emphasise women as the victims, while joke-telling traditions can differ. A famous folk song, "*hanv saiba poltodi vetam*" was adapted by the legendary filmmaker Raj Kapoor into "na mangoon sona chandi" for his movie *Bobby*.

We can consequently come to understand that gender is constructed in an interesting way through folk songs, dances and the use of the female body in it. This does not help in the narration of the film but gives it a wide appeal. It would not be wrong to say that many films have been huge commercial successes because of the usage of these methods by the filmmakers. The filmmakers are hence extremely conscious of the folklore, epithets, and idioms of the epics, the appealing folk dances and tunes and use them to the advantage of the films.

While we look at the context of gender in folklore, our discussion would be incomplete if we neglect the extension of the dialogue to the third gender, or the Hijra community in India. The next section will thus look at this in specific terms.

2.9 THE THIRD SEX, THE HIJRA COMMUNITY IN INDIA

Since time immemorial, there has existed a community in India called the hijras, the emasculated, castrated, impotent, or sexually effeminate people; they can be best described as the institutionalised third gender. The hijras find sanction for their lives in the epics and the Hindu tradition. When Rama was banished, he asked the men and

women to go back to their duties and when he came back, he saw them, they were neither men nor women. Hence, they are auspicious, and, in two particularly important aspects of man's rituals—marriage and the birth of the child—they are present. They are seen to have special powers, and their blessings are seen to make the woman fertile. Within the Hindu tradition Shiva, the Hindu god is *Ardhanarishwar* (the half-man and half-woman present in divinity), and, in the Mahabharata, it is said in the 13th year of exile of the Pandavas, Arjuna adorns the garb of a eunuch, offering dancing and singing lessons to Uttara. As they cannot carry their own heirs, they were traditionally guards in harems and in the Mughal courts. The historical attitude towards them is going forward mostly positive. Serena Nanda rightly sees that India and Pakistan have been "accommodating societies" towards the hijras. It is interesting to note that some members of the Hijra community are not only attending colleges and universities, but are also becoming doctors, policewomen and politicians, besides extraordinarily strong NGO workers.

In April 2014, the third gender was given a legal status and hijras like Prithika Yashini (the first transgender policewomen of Tamil Nadu), Madhubai Kinnar (the first Dalit transgender mayor of Chattisgarh), Manabi Bandopadhyay (the first principal from Bengal) and Rose Ventetesh (the first transgender TV show host from Tamil Nadu) are some of the prominent transgenders to have changed perceptions about their community in India.

2.10 LET US SUM UP

We have thus examined the multiple ways in which gender is constructed, their historical context and performance in folkloric contexts of India. Gender in folklore of India has a strong and determining presence. While it cannot be negated that folklore is fluid, we can further say that gender in it also changes in the neoliberal global space of India. However, the indestructible cultural idioms in folk culture do not diminish with time. We have also seen how self-identity of gender is maintained and is inviolable. When we study gender in folk performances, we must keep the ethics of the insider-outsider model of ethnography and participant observation. Further, folklore and gender in that cultural model is strongly observed in media, especially in the Hindi films. Going further, we can encapsulate that gender's historical context, women's studies in the cultural context of a nation, the construction and the functionality of the third gender are of pivotal importance while studying folklore. Without paying attention to it consequently makes our study of folklore totally incomplete and fragmentary.

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2.12 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Do you agree with Ben Amos that folklore has to be seen within the social context of a community?

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2. How is the agency of the female created in folklore?

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3. Explain the role of women in medieval Indian folklore.

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4. Why is the study of folklore called "half-truths"?

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5. Explore the significance of the Natyashastra in Indian folklore.

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6. Explain any one folk form from your region in five lines.

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7. Why has the definition of folklore become more and more complex in the 21st century?

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8. Why do popular Hindi films often use folk tunes?

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9. Do you agree that there is a specific Indian way of making films in India?

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10. Why are the Hijras in India considered auspicious?

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UNIT 3 FOLKLORE AND TRIBE

Structure

3.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand the meaning of folklore and the origin of the term 'tribe'
- Read the problematic of the concepts of aboriginal and indigenous people
- Understand the criteria for the categorisation of scheduled tribes in India
- Find out the significance of tribal folklore

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Every culture has its own form of expression of one's beliefs through folklore. In a sense, folklore is a body of traditions and knowledge held by a particular group of people or community, and is primarily handed down from one generation to another by word of mouth. One can find the misconception in the genesis of the term 'folklore'. Initially, the term 'folk' were restricted in scope, and it was perceived to be something 'inferior' to the so-called 'cultured sophisticated people'. This is one reason for the development of the concepts such as reserved, aboriginal and indigenous people, which in fact resulted to the derivation of the term 'tribe'. Many times, folk-related literatures were written by non-native anthropologists, political officers, and missionaries, among others, from a stigmatized perspective. The introduction of the concept of 'reserved' in India was basically started during the colonial regime from Brahmin and non-Brahmin, and subsequently to the introduction of a variety of categories such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and (more recently) Other Backward Class. Folklore occupies an integral role in the lives of the tribals, and there are some major lessons we can understand from the tribal folklore in the areas of the relationship of human with nature and ecology, and gender relation, among others.

3.2 UNDERSTANDING FOLKLORE

Folklore is perhaps as old as humankind. Folklore as a term was first suggested by one British antiquarian by the name of William Thoms in 1846. He suggested that

'folk-lore' refers to "the lore of the people" (Handoo 5). According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the word 'folk' generally means people; referring to the great proportion of the members of a people that determines the group character and that tends to preserve its characteristics form of civilization and its customs, arts and crafts, legends, traditions, and belief system from generation to generation. 'Lore' means something that is learned. Simply put, 'folklore' means the traditional belief system, customs, and narratives of a group of people that are passed through the generations by word of mouth. One can also say that folklore is a study to understand any traditional communities through its lore.

Folklore as a subject, a concept and a discipline, has been contested, constructed, and reinvented by folklorists since the word itself was first coined (Kolovos 2010: 34). Just as there is no one definition of folklore, there is no one approach to folklore studies— "...any approach to the field of folklore must begin with the materials of folklore" (Goldstein 2). According to Richard M. Dorson (1-51), folklore can be broadly grouped into four sectors, namely, oral literature, material culture, social folk customs, and performing folk arts.

Oral literature called verbal art or expressive literature are "spoken, sung, and voiced forms of traditional utterances" (Handoo 13). Oral literature is traditionally known as folk literature. Oral narrative, oral poetry or folk poetry, and proverbs and riddle are some important sub-divisions of folk literature. Material culture is also known as physical folklore, and this aspect of folklore and folklife is visible rather than aural (Handoo 15). Very close to material culture is the field of social folk customs. "Here the emphasis is on group interactions rather than on individual skills and performance" (Handoo 17). Performing folk arts primarily "concerns traditional music, dance and drama...performance here in its traditional sense strictly means the conscious presentation of these arts—dance, drama, folk music, etc.—by individuals or groups who carry these art forms from one generation to another" (Handoo 18).

Folk literature is often used interchangeably with tribal literature; although there are distinctness and interconnectedness between the two. Folk literature is transmitted by word of mouth, which is why it is also called oral tradition. In a sense, orality is one important characteristic of folk literature. Some major forms of folk literature include folk song, ballad, folk drama, fable, folktale, proverbs, riddles, and charms, among others. One can argue that for centuries and millennia, human beings have learnt to use writing; nevertheless, "there has existed side by side with the growing written record, a large and important activity carried on by those actually unlettered, and those not much accustomed to reading and writing" (Thompson 2021). History has showed us that each group of people, irrespective of their sizes, has handled its folk literature in its own way.

Oral tradition was the only means of transmitting knowledge and information from one generation to another in any preliterate groups including tribal communities. A few hundred years ago, many tribal communities, including the tribals of North East India, were preliterate societies, and their literatures were in oral form and oral in nature. One can find all the above-mentioned forms of folk literature in tribal literature where all of the forms have been orally transmitted from one generation to the next. Shirin Mehta (467) pointed out that "the various forms of folk literature such as folk songs, proverbs, riddles, and idioms illumine the depths of social consciousness better than conventional sources of historians' raw material". Folk literatures of the tribals have a lot to offer to global audiences; appreciating their array of cultural diversity would provide insight into a completely different world.

3.3 SELF, OTHER AND TRIBE

In order for us to understand the origin of the word 'tribe', we need to first look into the European concept of modernity of 'self' and 'other'. The self is an individual person as the object of its 'own reflective consciousness'. Since the 'self' is a reference by a subject to the same subject, this reference is necessarily subjective (Wikipedia). The concept of 'other' identifies the other human being as different from the 'self'; meaning, the condition and quality of 'otherness' is the state of being different from and foreign to the social identity of a person and the identity of the 'self'. "The imposition of 'otherness' alienates the person labelled as the 'other' from the centre of society, and places him or her at the margins of society, for being the 'other'" (ibid). "The existence of others is crucial in defining what is 'normal' and in locating one's own place in the world. The colonized subject is characterized as 'other' through discourses such as primitivism and cannibalism, as a means of establishing the binary separation of the colonizer and colonized and asserting the naturalness and primacy of the colonizing culture and world view" (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 154-55).

Jasodhara Bagchi (1) argued that "modernity was Europe's claim to hegemony, the terrain in which she naturalised her claims of superiority over the rest of the world". Gerard Delanty (10) observed that "Europe has been a cultural reference point for many parts of the world since the eighteenth century"; however, Europe "does not itself have any essential singularity that would make it a reference culture." He continues: "The claim of European universality cannot be seriously entertained and nor can the reduction of modernity to Europe" (ibid). In essence, the European concepts of 'self' and 'other' created a relationship of centre and periphery between the so-called cultured sophisticated people and those folks whom the European called primitive, barbaric, reserved, aboriginal, and indigenous, among others; marginalizing the 'other' and strengthening the 'self'. "The practise of Othering justifies the physical domination and cultural subordination of the native people by degrading them—first from being a national citizen to being a colonial subject—and then by displacing them to the periphery of the colony, and of geopolitical enterprise that is imperialism" (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 156-58).

Folk as a word has "a general meaning of 'people', in a range from particular social formations, including nations, to people in general" (Williams 136). In the pre-industrial, pre-urban and preliterate world, folk "had the effect of backdating all elements of *popular culture*, and was often offered as a contrast with modern popular forms, either of a radical and working-class or of a commercial kind" (Williams 137). In the 18th century, the term 'folk' was more restricted in scope, which the Europeans perceived as something 'inferior' to their own self. Thus, there was this misconception or discrimination in the genesis of the term 'folklore'.

Who are the aboriginal or indigenous peoples? "Indigenous peoples are those 'born in a place or region'. The term 'aboriginal' was coined as early as 1667 to describe the indigenous inhabitants of places encountered by European explorers, adventurers or seamen. The adjective 'aboriginal' has been more frequently used as the generic noun in recent times, the term 'aborigine' being considered by many to be too burdened with derogatory associations" (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 3).

One thing is certain that the terms such as 'aboriginal' and 'indigenous people' are quite problematic. Historically speaking, the use of such terms was nothing but a manifestation of political or hierarchical relationship that existed between the 'non-

ordinary people' and aboriginal people; wherein, the former was considered the centre of everything and the latter was akin to periphery. However, "...these dominant European traditions associated with the modernist movement at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries became questioned and challenged" (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 179). This was also a time when several local people started to reject those stereotypical terms given by their colonial Europeans. Instead, several indigenous peoples began to start using the terms of their choice such as 'First Nations' and 'Native Americans' instead of 'Red Indians' or 'American Indians', and 'Inuit' replacing 'Eskimo', among others. It would not be wrong to point out that the word 'tribe' actually is derived from the meanings of aborigine and indigeneity.

The term is used in several contexts to refer to a category of human social group. According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the word 'tribe' is a "notional form of human social organization based on as set of smaller groups, having temporary or permanent political integration, and defined by traditions of common descent, language, culture, and ideology". Merriam Webster dictionary defines the word 'tribe' as "a social group composed chiefly of numerous families, clans, or generations having a shared ancestry and language". M.D. Sahlins wrote, "A tribe is a segmental organization. It is composed of a number of equivalent, unspecialized multifamily groups, each the structural duplicate of the other: a tribe is a congeries of equal kin group blocs" (cited in Beteille 300). Although the term 'tribe' was used in ancient times such as in ancient Rome, it later came into use as a way to describe the "cultures encountered through European exploration". Not everyone was ready to subscribe to the idea of tribe on the grounds that it could not be precisely defined. Others objected to the negative connotations that the word had acquired in the colonial context. This is also the reason as to why many prefer to use 'ethnic group' instead of tribe, especially in the latter part of the twentieth century. Here, according to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, ethnic group is usually defined as a "group of people with a common ancestry and language, and shared cultural and historical tradition, and an identifiable territory".

By the 19th century, the concept of 'folk' became broader in scope as well as the colonization of many groups of people by the Europeans. We also witnessed the development of the word 'reserved category'—a term that is closely associated with the word tribe. It was at this point of time where most of the tribal groups across the globe were pushed to 'reserved category'; such was also the case in several tribal groups in India particularly during the colonial period. All of this was done for the political and economic benefits for the colonizers. In essence, the construction of several stereotypical notions and concepts such as 'self', 'other', aborigine, indigenous people, tribe, etc. showed the desperate attempt of the Europeans to legitimize their claim for dominance and superiority, and the creation of centre-periphery relations between them and others.

3.4 TRIBES IN INDIA

Andre Beteille (99) observed that "Ethnographic material from India did not figure prominently in the general discussion regarding the definition of tribe. The problem in India was to identify rather than define tribes, and scientific or theoretical considerations were never allowed to displace administrative or political ones." During the colonial period, a good number of ethnographers (primarily British civil servants working in India) published a series of descriptive catalogues of the tribes and castes in different parts of India. Among the better known are Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India,The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western*

Provinces and Oudh authored by William Crooke, and *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* of Herbert Hope Risley, and *The Tribes and Castes of Bombay* written by Reginald Edward Enthoven. Keeping these writings in mind, Andre Beteille (131) argues that "A perusal of these will show how unclear the line of division sometimes is between tribe and caste." Arguably, much of such collection was often written from a stereotypical perspective; the notions of 'self' and 'other', and centre-periphery relationship were frequently manifested in the colonial writings.

The introduction of the concept of 'reserved' in India was basically started during the colonial regime from Brahmin and non-Brahmin; this subsequently led to the introduction of Scheduled Castes and then a variety of categories such as Scheduled Tribes and (more recently) Other Backward Class. Followings are the criteria presently followed for specification of a community as a Scheduled Tribe: indication of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large, and economically backward. One may mention here that those criteria are not written in the Indian Constitution, but have become well established. This, however, is not to say that the framers of the Indian Constitution did not take note of the fact that certain ethnic groups or communities were suffering from extreme social, education, and economic backwardness on account of the primitive agriculture practices, lack of or total absence of infrastructure facilities and geographical isolation. The criteria were found in the 1931 Census and in some other parliamentary reports. From 1950 to 2013, there have been twenty-seven notifications for scheduling and/or de-scheduling of Scheduled Tribes notified by the Government of India.

AndreBeteille (316) argued, "We cannot therefore dismiss as anomalous the Indian practice of regarding as tribes a large assortment of communities, differing widely in size, mode of livelihood and social organization. They are all tribes because they all stood more or less outside of Hindu civilization and not because they were all at exactly the same stage of evolution." He further argues that "List of Indian tribes were in fact drawn up, with or without benefit of clear and consistent definitions". In India, the tribal groups are at different stages of social, economic and educational development. Of the total 705 communities or ethnic groups notified as Scheduled Tribes, there are at least 75 tribes who are considered as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTGs). These tribal groups are characterized by pre-agricultural level of technology, stagnant or declining population, extremely low literacy and subsistence level of economy.

According to 2011 Census, the tribal population of the country is 10.43 crores, constituting of 8.6% of the total Indian population. A huge population of 89.97% of them live in rural areas and only 10.03% live in urban areas. The Scheduled Tribes are notified in all the states and union territories with an exception of Haryana, Punjab, Chandigarh, Delhi NCR and Puducherry. Most of the Scheduled Tribes live in the two distinct geographical areas, namely, the Central India and North East India. It is estimated that more than 75% of the tribal populations is concentrated in Central India in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Gujarat and Rajasthan. In North East India, the tribal communities are found in all the eight states of this region. In India, the process of designating or scheduling of a community as a Scheduled Tribe is a continuing one.

3.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF TRIBAL FOLKLORE

Tribes and tribal folklore have a lot to offer to the world such as human-nature relationship, a kind of relationship between male and female, and a variety of other

things. Tribal folklore is an intricate combination of myths, life and indigenous/folk knowledge. A 'symbiosis of human and nature' is clearly manifested in tribal folklore. Hence, the rural population enjoys a deep familiarity and bond with animate and inanimate creatures. Tribal folk-tales reflect this close communion in which pride of place is always given to human beings, because they have intelligence and wisdom. There are folk-tales where, in the beginning of this planet earth, human beings and animals co-existed peacefully, speaking the same tongue, and performing the same agricultural activities. Such a narrative is found among the Tangkhul people of North East India and across the border in Myanmar.

Tribals are basically people of deep emotions, they 'relish delicate feelings.' Proverbs are the means through which they reflect their 'sophisticated manners and social attitudes'. They are also excellent examples of tribal wisdom which is based on their concrete experience rather than on cerebral activity. The underlying current of tribal living is a sense of celebration, and the jovial and celebrative character of tribal personality is best portrayed in their strong musical tradition and performing arts including folk dance. Folksongs occupy an integral part in tribal music; their folksongs are of "various types based on themes viz. dirges or mourning songs, song expressing joy and laughter, agriculture songs, love songs, war songs, seasonal songs, propitiation songs, etc." (Mawon 119). Celebrations provide a space for the tribals to display their cultural heritage, to ensure cultural harmony, and to promote solidarity among the people. Storytellers, singers, minstrels and other kind of folk entertainers have acted for centuries as sources for the transmission and dissemination of information and tribal knowledge by word of mouth. The values, attitudes, beliefs and culture of the people are propagated, reinforced, and perpetuated through these folk forms.

One can relate folk dances of the tribals with their own traditional culture. Dances in many tribal communities are performed in rituals or religious contexts, and the recreational purpose—as misunderstood by many—is not necessarily a primary purpose of their folk dance performance. For instance, some well-known folk dances of the tribals of North East India such as *Bihu*, *Nongkrem*, and *Cheraw*, among others are performed with religious connotations and in cultural contexts. Most tribal societies have infrangible relations between human, land and religion; such relations are also expressed in the form of folk dance. *Bihu* dance is an indigenous folk dance of Assam, and they have been performing this dance for many centuries. Literally, *Bihu* means "to ask blessings and prosperity from the gods". It is a symbolic festival of the Assamese cultural identity, and is meant to "celebrate and emulate the seasonal spirit, celebrating fertility and passion". *Ka Pomblang Nongkrem* dance, popularly known as *Nongkrem* dance, is a five-day-long religious festivals of the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya. This religious dance is performed to 'appease' their goddess *Ka Blei Synshar* for a 'rich bumper harvest and prosperity' of the people. *Cheraw* dance, popularly known as 'bamboo dance', is a ritual dance of the Mizo tribe who are primarily settled in Mizoram. Initially, this dance was performed as part of rituals to "provide peace to the departed soul of a mother who had left her new-born child"; however, such traditional belief is said to have diluted and is now modified considerably. In essence, tribal folklore such as folk dance reminds us the connection between human being and religion, and also the human dependence on nature for their survival.

Indian colonial experiences have shown several differences of worldview amongst the Europeans and the tribals. We have pointed out that a lot of colonial writings in the 18th and 19th centuries were written from a stigmatized perspective; wherein, a lot of usage

of words like primitive, barbaric, savage, cannibal, aborigine, and backward people signify how the tribals were judged from the European socio-cultural backgrounds and moral standards. Contrariwise, there are also colonial writings that talked about the simplicity, beauty, generosity, and honesty of the tribals. Speaking of morality and ethics, several Europeans particularly Britishers failed to realize that their presence in the tribal lands were not to conserve and protect nature but to exploit and loot the resources of the tribals. The Britishers, for the construction of railways and exploitation of resources, pushed several tribals in India to reserved category, and 'allotted' the tribals a piece of non-arable land—such is the case in Gujarat as found in the writings of a celebrated Indian anthropologist, Verrier Elwin. On many counts, the tribals have to search for other place to do their subsistence farming, and more so because of most tribals prefer to be self-sufficient, isolated and autonomous.

The tribals especially in Central India often readjusted itself with the nature every time they were pushed to other place/land. It is observed that land as an asset is not something very important in the early agrarian tribal history, and their attachment to the land at that time was not as strong as they are today. Thus, if land is available, they would move away and adapt to their new environment. Periodically, people moved from place to place and hence there is a wonderful relationship between human and nature. Since most tribals do subsistence farming, Verrier Elwin remarked that the agrarian land, once they moved away, completely rejuvenate to the extreme where one would not identify that the human existence was there in that land. This in a way lessoned us the possibility of establishing a peaceful nature–human relations.

One can find a good number of tribal folktales that illustrate the close relationship between nature and human kind. In many folk or traditional religions of the tribals, one can find the reverence given to nature including trees, rivers, and other resources. For instance, during the construction of folk housing of the village chiefs and clan heads among some Naga tribes, certain religious rites and rituals were performed before they cut down the select trees that were meant to be used as pillars for the houses. A similar performance was also made during the 'feast of merit', wherein the host of the feast would go to the forest and select a tree that would be erected as a wooden monument in front of his house. A day before the tree is cut down, the host would perform rituals near the tree trunk and request the chosen tree to come and stay with him. According to their belief system, some trees have 'souls', and for which they speak with those trees as though the latter could understand human communication. Acknowledging human–nature interdependence, the tribals protect their nature and in return nature provides them their needs. Traditionally, in contrary to what we see today, the economy of tribals is mainly consumption-based economy, and for which the question of over-exploitation of natural resources hardly arose.

In the field of folk performing arts, theatre is one important aspect in some tribal cultures. Theatre has been an integral part of Kashmiri culture for centuries; although there were always challenges in their attempt to preserve and promote this sub-sector of folklore. Kashmir as a society has experienced many turbulent times such as invasions, attacks, floods, famines, raids, oppressions, fires, and epidemics from time to time, and it was not always easy for the Kashmiris to continue performing and promoting their theatrical performances. One such theatre that is striving hard to survive is *Shikargah Pather*—a dance drama that focussed on preserving ecology, wildlife, and environment. Describing the basic necessities and benefits of the forests, the artists talked about environmental and wildlife issues in their performances, and seek the attention of viewers

of the play to live in harmony with nature including forest and wildlife for their mutual benefit. Climate change, environmental degradation, and the extinction of wildlife are real. Humankind cannot live without nature, and this dance drama is one small initiative taken up by Kashmiri artists to create awareness on the importance of forest and the species living in it.

In the rural areas of Orissa, there is one dying religious theatrical performance called *Danda Nata*. It consists of multiple dances, and for which it is also regarded as a dance festival. Danduas perform the 'dance of penance' called *Danda Nacha*, and they go through painful procedures to worship goddess Kali and Lord Shiva asking for their blessings. "The *Danda Nata*is a physically demanding folk dance. Besides getting exposed to extremely heat conditions during the day, the danduas also pierce sharp objects into their back, get their body stung by poisonous snakes and walk on fire or sharp objects to show their devoutness" (Milaap, n.d.). They stay on a starving stomach and take food only once a day during the more than 11 days long festival period. The dance performers punish themselves and give no kind of luxury and comfort to their body for the sins and crimes they and their people have committed on the planet earth. They shoulder the painful traditions to relieve the natives who pay the *Danduas* for asking gods and goddesses to fulfil their desires. *Danda Nata* lessoned us those humans have to be accountable for their sins and crimes, and bear the punishment of their wrongdoings. In a sense, one would require to have a sense of equilibrium on this planet earth.

Since the beginning of time, social and political tensions have always been a part of human societies. Each society chose different approach of both violent and nonviolent means to resolve or to manage the issues or conflict in a given society. In most democracies, the practice of democratic means to voice the grievances of the people found to be most suitable in many instances. However, democratic means such as rallies, protest, sit-in protest, strike, or civil disobedient movement are found impractical in some conflict-ridden places where security forces are armed with draconian laws such as the 1958-Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) of India. Kashmir is one such conflict-ridden place wherein civilians are often the victims whenever there is military operation, political upheaval, religious conflict, or social evils that are oppressive in nature. In such an environment where the above-mentioned democratic means become undesirable in addressing and voicing people's issues, the oldest and richest traditional folk theatre of Kashmir called *Bhand Pather* offers a practical alternative. It is one distinct Kashmiri folk theatre combining mimicry, buffoonery, music and dance; "combination of play and dance in a satirical style where the artists lament the problems, oppressions and social evils in the society". *Bhand Pather* highlighted and spoke against autocracy, feudalism, corruption, oppression, religious issue, political unrest, and other social evils of the contemporary society. This folk theatre, in essence, becomes the voice of common people; bringing forth their grievances and concerns before the Government by staging a play.

Tribes and its folklore have a lot to offer to the world in understanding the law of property inheritance and also on men-women relations. Since the 1850s, in much of the discussion on inheritance in the European world, patriarchy and polygamy are seen as accepted practice of civilized societies. Whereas, it was problematic for them to understand on what would happen to inheritance or whom the assets go if the society is matriarchal. Here, tribal communities have provided excellent insights into understanding of humans; meaning, tribal societies have produced insightful cultures of

polyandry and matriarchy. One may mention here that most of polyandry and matriarchy are found among the tribals, and these two provide maximum power to women character. A concept of goddess or a woman-centred deity can be found in some tribal traditional religions. For instance, *Danteswari* is a well-known 'mother goddess' figure among all the tribal communities in the Bastar region in the state of Chhattisgarh. Likewise, the Khasis of Meghalaya regarded *Ka Blei Synshar* as 'all powerful' goddess. The Tangkhuls of Manipur in the pre-Christianized period have a female deity called *Phunghui Philâva*, who was regarded as a deity of wealth. What is common among these goddesses and deities is that the tribals seek blessing and thank them for the prosperity and plentiful harvest.

Polyandry is rare and is found practiced mostly among the tribals such as the Toda tribe of Nilgiris in Tamil Nadu, and Parasis in Jammu region and Jaunsar-Bawar region in Uttarakhand, among others. Matriarchy, as a social system that gives power and control to women rather than men, is found in some groups including Mosuo ethnic group of China, Birbri tribe of Costa Rica, Umoja tribe of Kenya, Minangkabau ethnic group of Indonesia, and Akan ethnic group of Ghana.

Matrilineal system offers an environment where women enjoyed respect, prestige and power. And descent and the inheritance of property are traced through female lines. In India, some similar systems were found such as *Aliyasantana* system practiced by Tuluva community of Karnataka, and *Marumakkathayam* system was widely followed by some castes and tribal groups in Kerala. The Garo tribe of North East India is one of the few remaining matrilineal societies in the world. A Garo family is headed by the mother of the house, but the father is responsible for providing sustenance. Property of a Garo family is inherited by the youngest daughter, and if there is no female inheritor within the immediate family, the property passes to the daughter of the mother's sister. The Khasi tribe of Meghalaya is another surviving matrilineal society. Khasi, like in other societies, have a rich folklore, and their tradition of matrilineal descent is closely associated with their oral narratives. It is said that Khasi kings in the past were engaging on wars and defending their territory and thus the responsibility of running the family was left to women. Thus, women's position and role in society became "very deep rooted and respected". Among this tribe, the *Ka Khaddur* (the youngest daughter of the family) inherits all ancestral property, and she holds the responsibility of taking care of her parents in their old age and also the well-being of her siblings. Although their participation in politics is minimal and are not participated in the *Dorbar Shnong* (a local institution) headed by *Rangbah Shnong* (headman), Khasi women controlled in many areas including domestic affairs.

Concerns such as gender equality and women's roles and status have been discoursing and deliberating at least for a few decades now by academia, activists and others. In Indian context, generally, we speak of a better social status for women in tribal rather than in caste-based society. One remark of Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf (1968), a renowned Austrian ethnologist who spent forty years studying tribal cultures in North East India and in other tribal areas, noted that "many women in more civilized parts of India may well envy the women of the Naga Hills, their high status and their free and happy life; and if you measure the cultural level of a people by the social position and personal freedom of its women, you will think twice before looking down on the Nagas as *savage*". A good number of folk narratives and customary practice of Naga women being 'messengers of peace' or 'peace makers' such as *Pukreila* of the Tangkhuls having the right to 'intervene' in war could be translated as women traditionally enjoying

a high social position in the casteless and classless Naga society. Every human wants to live in an equal society and have equal access to power, resources and opportunities, and also be treated with dignity, respect and fairness. From the tribes and tribal folklore, we have a lot to study about human–nature relation, equality, honesty, simplicity, and respect among all individuals. In short, there are absolutely different types of networking that we can understand from studying tribe and tribal folklore.

3.6 LET US SUM UP

Folklore is perhaps as old as humankind. Folklore occupies an integral role in the lives of the tribals, and there are some major lessons we can study from the tribal folklore in the areas of the relationship of human with nature and ecology, and gender relation, among others. Folk literature is often used interchangeably with tribal literature, although there are distinctness and interconnectedness between the two. The construction of several stigmatizing notions and concepts such as 'self', 'other', aborigine, indigenous people, tribe, etc. showed the desperate attempt of the Europeans to legitimize their claim for dominance and superiority, and the creation of centre–periphery relations between them and others. However, the notion attached to the word 'tribe' and the negative worldviews of the tribals in the past have lost its relevance because of several reasons including a progressive change in the lives of the tribals. Tribes and tribal folklore have a lot to offer to the world such as human–nature relationship, a kind of relationship between male and female, and a variety of other things.

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3.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What is folklore? Identify a few misconceptions in the conception of the term 'folklore'.

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2. What is the political or hierarchical relationship that exists between 'non-ordinary people' and aboriginal people?

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3. What does tribe as a social epistemology convey?

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4. How are tribal literature and folk literature distinct and interconnected?

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5. Elaborate on the human–nature interdependence by citing examples from any tribal society.

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6. How does the practice of polyandry and matriarchy provide an insight in understanding the law of property inheritance?

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7. Write a brief note on women-centred deity of a tribal society.

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8. Write an essay on the categorization of tribes by the Government of India. Mention some important criteria on which the categorization was made.

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9. Write a note on the use of a theatrical performance in addressing environmental issue.

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10. Write a note on what we can understand from tribes and tribal folklore?

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UNIT 4 FOLKLORE AND RELIGION

Structure

4.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand what 'folk religion' and 'religious folklore' mean and how their theoretical understanding has evolved over the years within folklore studies
- Critically observe the ways in which religion creates folklore and folklore shapes religious beliefs
- Appreciate the nuanced ways in which folklore expresses religion and religious beliefs and challenges normative understanding of religion
- Gain insights into shared characteristics and heterogeneity of religious ideas expressed through folklore in India
- Learn various methods of critically studying the relationship between folklore and religion

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit is part of the broad theme of 'Folklore and Social Epistemology'. The *Routledge Handbook of Social Epistemology* defines social epistemology as "the interdisciplinary inquiry into the myriad ways humans socially acquire, create, construct, transmit, store, represent, revise, and review knowledge, information, belief, and judgment." (xvi, 2019). Folklore remains one of the most significant ways in which communities express their identities and pass traditional knowledge from one generation to the other. This is not to say that folklore is static and a reservoir for residual past that

has no relevance in the present. On the contrary, folklore is the space where communities negotiate with altering times retaining that which is essential to their social and religious identities simultaneously assimilating changes that are necessary resultantly making folklore dynamic and living. Investigation of folklore then can provide us useful insights into how social and religious identities of cultures evolve over time, and the means through which they are maintained and sustained. This approach becomes particularly relevant in the context of Indian subcontinent which is characterised by multiplicity and where various cultures have shared a dialogic relationship for centuries shaping unique socio-religious identities. Our social identities, however, are constituted of multiple facets that include our gender, caste, class, religion, sexual orientation, physical ability or disability, etc. All these facets impact the ways in which we interact with our surroundings, how we express ourselves, and how we are represented in creative expressions of a culture. Folklore of a community also engages with these social constructions of identities. This particular unit would delve deep into the interaction between folklore and religion with all its intricacies and complexities with special focus on the folk traditions from the Indian subcontinent. By now you must already be acquainted with how academic perception of folklore has evolved over time. Therefore, the unit will begin by highlighting the challenges in defining religion, from there we will move on to trace the trajectory of evolution of concepts of 'folk religion' and 'religious folklore'. The consequent sections will focus on various approaches that can be adopted in critical investigations of folklore and religion, and what religious folk traditions tell us about the sociological aspects of a culture and vice-versa.

4.1.1 Problems in Defining 'Religion'

Religion is also one of the significant ways through which we try to know and comprehend the world around us. Since folklore is an aesthetic expression of the realities, conscious and unconscious of a community, religion constitutes a major element of it. Folklore on religion not only reflects the deeply held values and beliefs of a community, it also demonstrates the community's conceptualization of ideas of divinity and afterlife. Before we dwell on the subject of folklore and religion, let us first try to understand the challenges of defining religion itself.

Sociologists and anthropologists' understanding of religion has for long been determined by a Christo-centric Western perspective. For instance, Emile Durkheim defined religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community, called a church, all those who adhere to them" (1915). Durkheim's definition does highlight some important aspects of what is referred to as religion. Religions are characterised by a 'unified system of belief and practices' that 'unite...single moral community'. However, the definition is also an example of the narrow understanding of religion that has dominated intellectual spaces for a very long time. Firstly, by referencing the church, Durkheim limits perception of religion to 'organised' or 'institutionalised' religion. This relegates to the margins religious practices that are not organised under an institution. Secondly, the idea of 'sacred' differs from culture to culture. In different communities, religion and domain of religion varies. For instance, in Christianity, one sees a marked distinction between religious and the secular domain. In religions like Hinduism and Buddhism for instance, concepts like *dharma* and *dhamma* necessitate religion as a way of life, which means that it would codify one's attitude towards apparently secular reality as well. It includes appropriate behaviour in all aspects of life, including social, legal, moral, and cosmological.

One must beware of falling into the trap of simplified unilateral understanding of religion. This is also reflected in how there has been a tendency to make belief the sole basis of defining religion which has made belief studies the lens through which all cultures and religions are studied. Scholars often forget to take into account the practice of religion which is another very crucial aspect of it. Moreover, before we go any further, it is crucial to understand that beliefs are not always religious; they can be non-religious or secular in nature as well. In order to understand the difference between religious and non-religious belief systems, one can look at Hinduism on the one hand and atheism or agnosticism, on the other. Similarly, one might say one believes in home remedies. Belief also refers to both the things we believe in and the act of believing. One must also avoid using terms like superstition while talking about the belief system of a particular community as it implies value judgment. Critically reflecting on one's own belief system might help understand the context sensitivity of ideas like superstitious. For instance, one might find even non-religious people using phrases like "touch-wood" or "finger's crossed", and one does not necessarily term them superstitious for saying/doing so. Some scholars have suggested that one can employ social construction theory while thinking about how we connotatively understand terms like 'folk' and 'belief". Our judgments are socially constructed through the process of naturalising what 'our' group takes for granted while othering the beliefs and knowledge systems of groups unlike one's own. One has to move beyond these constructions of 'otherness' contained in 'folk beliefs.' As Patrick Mullen says, "belief exists at every level and in every context of society-official and unofficial, institutional and noninstitutional, enfranchised and disenfranchised, the centre and the margins, and small and large groups" (139). Hence, what we can conclude is that there is no singular definition of religion that can be applied to all cultures.

4.2 FOLKLORE AND RELIGION

4.2.1 'Folk Religion' and 'Religious Folklore': Theoretical Debates and Problematics

Now, let us examine a few of the debates surrounding religion within folkloristics. The first set of controversies are around the term 'folk religion'. Before we delve into understanding the different aspects of folklore and religion, it is important to understand what is folk religion and how the conceptualisation and perception of the same has evolved over the years. Folklore was initially understood as creative expressions of groups that were considered rural or primitive. Folk religion, then, was also seen as a religion that existed alongside institutional and official religion. In the Indian context, the classical Sanskritic and Brahmanical practices of religion have often taken the centre stage at the cost of marginalisation of regional and vernacular practices and beliefs. For instance, many northern states in India worship *ahoi mata* (folk deity of fertility). She protects children and blesses them with good health. In most north Indian states, women observe fast for the well-being of their children. One must note that, in the past, the fast was observed only for sons, but several women observe it for their daughters too now. These changes reflect the dynamic nature of religious traditions. However, this goddess *ahoi mata* is not part of Brahminical Hinduism; she does not belong to the universe of Kali and Durga. However, one will find Kali and Durga in folk expressions too. This can be seen as an example of how Puranic practices and knowledge has been assimilated into vernacular cultures.

Similarly,'religious folklore' has been another controversial term for it has been meant to imply unofficial practices that are associated with mainstream religion. Implying that folk religious practices are 'unofficial' or tangential is problematic. It is crucial to understand the politics behind the dichotomies like 'official' and 'unofficial'. To begin with the tendency to speak in binaries is an externally imposed one, and it is specifically Western in nature derived from the definitions like those given by Durkheim. Also, when we discuss specific religious practices in terms of folk religion or religious folklore, we imply that these categories are branches or deviations from a centre. This implication is flawed in its very perception as it assumes that somewhere religion exists in its pure and essential form, and as soon as it interacts with communities it gets contaminated. One needs to challenge such essentialist views of religion.

One also needs to be wary of considering categories as watertight and the 'truth'. Most of these categories were created by Western scholars who inhabit mostly homogeneous spaces. And as Primaro says in his article "Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife" that "by naming and categorising scholars are invested with the power of controlling perceptions about a culture". This singular and exclusionist perception needs to be challenged by scholars of folkloristics. One also has to understand the relationship between folklore and religion in two ways. All religions have a corpus of folklore that reflects its dominant values and beliefs, its traditions, its rituals, mythological beliefs, etc. So, in this instance, folklore becomes a vehicle to foreground and perpetuate religious beliefs. However, folklore can also be used to produce religious identities. Folklore can be both a product of religious discourse and be a producer of religious beliefs. Moreover, religious folklore is found both within organized religions and outside them as well. Folklore on religion also transcends sacred space. By this we mean that it is not necessary that one will come across religious folklore only within holy spaces. Folklore on religion is found outside places of worship as well, sometimes in places most mundane.

Moreover, it is the practice or performance of a religion that makes it real and externalises the belief system. It is through practice and performance that inner experiences and deeply held values of a community can be made observable. Hence, religion and religious practices become real only through praxis when they come in contact with communities. This understanding undercuts the idea of purity of religions. When one looks at religious sentiments or rituals expressed through folklore, one witnesses the way religion functions in reality. The public sphere where religions are actually practiced are porous. Looking at religion the way it is expressed in everyday reality helps one not to residualize it. This will help us ultimately to avoid reifying the originality of religions in institutional religions. As folklorists, it is crucial for us to re-adjust our approach to religion which should be inspired by an honest interest in studying the real ways in which people express their religiosity rather than approaching it from the outside, trying to squeeze in the heterogeneous, pluralistic religious beliefs into clear categories.

One powerful example of the plurality of religion as practiced amongst the folk and complexity of the same can be seen in the interaction between *jogis* and *sufis*. The dialogue between *jogis* and *sufis* has for a really long time studied in terms of syncretism, which means the amalgamation of different schools of thoughts or religions. Within the public sphere those distinctions were blurred. When we try to understand *jogis* as Hindus, we falter, because they challenged Vedic Hinduism and several *jogis* are Muslims. Similarly, *sufi* saints challenge traditional Islam. In fact, in the public sphere, phrases like *baba*, *pir*, and *fakir* are used interchangeably for both *jogis* and *sufis*.

Hence, we need to investigate and interrogate the language of syncretism which presumes existence of 'pure Islam' or 'pure Hinduism' in this case. Folktales like *Heer-Ranjha* reflect the fluidity of these religious beliefs on the ground. Ranjha who is Muslim becomes a *jogi* when he hears of Heer's marriage to another man. It is in folk narratives like these that the hybrid nature of religion and religious practices is reflected.

Folklore, in forms of folk songs, tales and legends, reflect the complex interactions between multiple religious practices that people dabble in. One such short tale comes from Haryana, wherein a character from Ramayana appears alongside a folk deity. The tale is that of Ravana who encounters *bemata* (a folk deity who writes the destiny of children) during one of his incognito nightly inspections of his subjects. The folktale is interesting because it dramatises the intersection between 'classical' mythological characters and the folk deity. The tale ends in Ravana's acknowledgement and acceptance of powers of *bemata*. The presence of these two characters from supposedly two disparate realms is not a shock for the mortal characters in the tale but only to the mythological characters who are considered belonging to the realm of classical mythology.

4.2.1.1 Theoretical and Methodological Interventions

Anthropologists and folklorists have recognised these problems and tried to come up with alternatives of understanding the relationship between folklore and religion. One such folklorist was Leonard Norman who introduced the phrase 'vernacular religion'as a substitute for folk religion. He argued that one needs to arrive at alternative terminology which would counter the connotative biases associated with terms like 'folk religion'. Scholars have suggested other terms like 'popular religion', 'common religion', and 'implicit religion' instead of folk religion. Don Yoder provided a working definition of folk religion calling it "local/folk expression of religion", offering terms like "folk cultural dimension of religion" and "the religious dimension of folk-culture" in place of folk religion and religious folklore. However, researchers like Marion Bowman have argued that just changing the terminology will not serve the purpose. The methodology of how vernacular religion is studied needs to change.

One of the most successful approaches that is being adopted by folklorists in order to understand the relationship between folk and religion is the idea of reflexivity. This approach, instead of hiding the biases and giving academic pursuit an illusion of objectivity, lays bare the relationship between power and knowledge. It makes it necessary for the scholar to have a nuanced understanding of their positional bias vis-a-vis the community that is being studied. It becomes as important for the scholar to turn their lens and analyse their positions and how those positions influence their interpretations of religions and practices that they study. The concept of vernacular religion is considered both inductive and reflexive. It is Marion Bowman who has particularly emphasised on adopting an inductive approach to the methodology of studying folk religion. In studies like these, the context becomes extremely important. The religious perspectives and the lenses through which they are viewed and interpreted are all situated in appropriate contexts. Working like this does justice in revealing the complexities of religion in reality. For example, when I study religious practices in Haryana, I keep in mind the discipline, methodology, and theoretical framework that I employ, the purpose of the study and where and how the research findings would be used, all impact what I see and the way I see. Additionally, my educational background, my own religious beliefs, my gender all add to the perspective through which the practices

are being interpreted. Primiano argued that study of religion needs to take into consideration the individual who practices it. At the level of the individual, the binaries like 'formal-informal', or 'folk and classical' cease to exist. Not only does public sphere demonstrate assimilation of Puranic and Vedic traditions into folk traditions, but also that of religious practices from Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, and other religions.

In 1982, David J Hafford proposed to study religion through experiential source hypothesis instead of belief source hypothesis. This approach contests the presumption that religious beliefs are delusional. Contrary to such understanding of belief, experiential source hypothesis posits that religious beliefs stem from the human need to rationalise experiences that are common to all humanity. This commonality challenges the hierarchy of progressive, rational beliefs, and those categorised as primitive and regressive.

4.2.2 Characteristics of Folk Religious Practices: A Few Examples from Folk Traditions

There are religions that are not institutionalised or organised, yet are central to communities. These are religions and religious practices that are not codified in holy written scripts, or lack pilgrim sites or a section of clergy that is trained to spread the message. These are usually the characteristics of what is known as 'folk religion'. For example, In the state of Haryana, apart from worshipping Brahmanical gods and goddesses, the Hindus also worship folk deities. Each village has a deity that is worshipped and remembered by the community members at significant junctures in their life. This deity in most villages is known as *dada kheda*. *Dada* means grandfather and *Kheda* means village. Inhabitants call upon their ancestors to provide their protection to the village establishment. The site of worship is usually a small structure under a tree; everyone in the village knows how and when to offer their prayers to the deity, but the basis of their knowledge comes from oral tales and instructions passed on by the elders. The site of worship does not have an assigned pandit either; the community members know how to offer oblations and, in times of doubt, consult with village elders. The example makes clear the centrality of orality as a medium of passing down knowledge. The lack of a scripture for preservation of this knowledge has been used in order to marginalise these practices. This trend reflects the scripto-centric propensity and biases of knowledge systems (Satyanath). Orality is what lends folk practices of religion its dynamic nature. This can be seen in praxis when one looks at how *dada kheda*'s worship has evolved over time. This variation can also be seen in the varied modes of practice followed in different villages at any given point in time. In some villages,*dada kheda*'s shrine has acquired a figurine of a saint, significant to the religious and spiritual makeup of a village. This decision is often taken by the villagers who revere saints who take *samadhi* (considered as the most advanced state of meditation) at these shrines. The above example demonstrates how the shrine in this case adapted to the needs and devotions of those who practice it, not vice-versa. On the other side of the spectrum, there are still villages that have no idol or figurine within its structure, which was more of a norm in the past.

One can observe from the above example that the relationship between the religious discourse and the folk who practice it is dialogic in most cases, not didactic. It also reflects the complexity of these religious practices which challenges the flawed and essentialist views that folk expressions are simplistic or naive. By taking into account the centrality of this practice to local people can help us rethink ideas of centre and margin. It all depends on the perspective and discourse. When looked at from the

perspective of major religions in India that are perceived as central, these folk religious practices might appear marginal, yet to the people of these communities they are central. In fact, one can say that the local folk retain practices that are crucial to their identity while adapting the dominant religious practices of Hinduism, Sikhism, or Islam without compromising on their belief systems. And this is a significant aspect of folklore for us to remember.

Worshipping the *gram devta* (village deity) is a common practice across the Indian subcontinent and has a rich history; it did not require a centralised institute to perpetuate its beliefs. H.S Bhatti and Daniel M. Michon in their 2004 article "Folk Practices in Punjab" refer to a similar phenomenon in Punjab known as worshipping of *jathera*. *Jathera* is the Punjabi equivalent of *dada* in Haryanavi which is a reference to ancestors. Bhatti and Michon mention that, despite prohibitions imposed upon ancestor worship by organised religions like Sikhism and Islam, the practice has persisted. In the state of Orissa, locals pay tribute to their ancestors once a year. These instances prove that assimilation is at the heart of how religion is practiced across regions in India.

4.2.3 Religious Folklore as a Reflection of Regional Realities and Beliefs

Worshipping the ancestors and folk deities like *Gugga Pir* (folk snake deity) are based on and reflect local belief systems and conceptualisations of cosmology and life. In most parts of north India, the cosmology not only contains *devlok* and *naglok*, that is the world of the gods and the netherworld which is the world of the snakes. It also constitutes of, along with the mortal realm which is known as *matlok* or *narlok* depending on the region, a fourth category that is porous and cuts across the tripartite division, which is known as *pitrulok* (world of the ancestors).Within folk belief, it is as important to appease and keep ancestors and their spirits happy as the gods. Their existence exerts equal power over the psyche and consciousness of the locals as gods/ goddesses of 'organised' religion they espouse to. Similarly, snakes have been one of the most pertinent dangers to communities engaged primarily in agriculture or animal husbandry. Praying to a snake deity is a reflection of the local anxieties and issues that people face. Their belief addresses their unique worldview and realities.

The plurality and heterogeneity of religious beliefs can be witnessed in almost all public spaces. For instance, several folk songs of Haryana reflect a seepage of Kabir's poetry and philosophy. Moreover, one needs to understand the geographical and cultural heterogeneity of India. Organised religions like Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism create an umbrella belief system and practices for believers across the subcontinent. Yet we all are aware that these regions have varied cultural practices and social structures. Folk practices in a community then transcend one's alliance to organised religion and are based on common knowledge, fears, anxieties, ambiguities of a shared geographical and cultural space. Some of these beliefs that have significance in the lives of locals find no expression in organised religions. For instance, depending on where one is in the subcontinent, different species of animals and birds become significant to locals for their livelihood depends on them. Local folk beliefs would often have space for rituals pertaining to those animals or birds. Several north Indian communities have days reserved for paying oblations to oxen for they are central to sustaining agricultural practices.

4.2.4 Folklore and Religion: Understanding Methods of *Doing* Folklore Studies

When understood under the broad theme of 'social epistemology', it becomes crucial to approach folklore studies from an intersectional framework. Here, folklore is studied by taking into account its intersections with gender, caste, materiality, and other social identities. This intersectionality impacts both the scholar, but also how religion is experienced by members of a community. The context of the individual becomes very crucial in the lived experience of folklore. For instance, the way men practice and experience religion and religious practices is very different from the way women do. Across communities in north India women perform the religious ritual of *vrat katha*. In this ritual, women narrate legends and mythological tales associated with the fasting ritual. The ritual of *vrat katha* is a significant socio-religious practice in north IndianHindu households. The ritual consists of multiple genres of folklore, including narration of tales that contextualise the mythological origins and cultural and psychological significance of observing fast.

The complexity for a student of folklore is multitudinous here. Firstly, the ritual comprises multiple genres that would determine the approach taken up. For instance, if we focus on the folktales that are narrated during the rituals, then we are focussing on the oral narratives, and our approach would be based on that. Whereas, if one chooses to focus on the performance of the ritual the approach would be different. The genre of the folk performance would determine how it would be studied. Genre could be one of the heuristic devices to critically understand folklore and its evolution.

Coming back to the idea of intersectionality, in the abovementioned instance, can be seen in how the ritual derives its social and cultural relevance from the fact that it is considered one of the primary responsibilities of a wife. Creating an intersection between gender and religion. Most of the *vrat kathas* are observed and performed by women, majority of them by wives. By observing these ritual fasts, women contribute to the well-being of the household by practicing penance for the health and prosperity of the household and its members. This ritual can be seen as a performance of religiosity and ascertaining that, by continuing the sacred cycle, the women folk keep their homes auspicious and blessed. Men, on the other hand, usually occupy the marginal space during performance of these rituals. Hence, gender determines how we experience religion and religious practices.

The religious folk songs sung by men and women are also different. In most folk cultures across the subcontinent, there is a demarcation between the kind of songs sung in public spaces by men and private spaces by women. The religious songs reflect significant sociological and psychological realities of the performers. For instance, if we take into consideration the songs of women, it is usually their piety and devotion that saves the lives of their husbands or family members. Folklore dramatises that if a woman forgets to keep a fast or makes a mistake like drinking water unknowingly during one, the repercussions are devastating. The songs then put the religious responsibility and safety of the household on to the shoulders of women. Since, women's social positions are tied to their families and limited to domestic space, their piety and *tap* (penance) become only ways for them to display strength. Hence, what we witness in the above interpretation is an intersection of religious folklore with sociological identities of the performers.

The difference can also be seen in folk traditions of representation of female and male *bhakt*. Male devotees often have the option of renouncing the world in search of higher truth. Their prayers are not concerned with issues like the health of their families. Their concern would be more spiritual and philosophical. Women do not have the option of renouncing their domestic duties in search of God or truth. Their social position denies them that. In their songs, the concern is more material than spiritual since they are the primary caretakers of the family members.

From the above example, we could also see the functional need of religious rituals. This approach takes into consideration specific sociological and psychological functions that religion plays within a community. But scholars have challenged this methodology of approaching rituals and beliefs from a functionalist dimension, the reason being that such approach prioritizes the interpretation of the scholar over the local significance and meaning of rituals and beliefs. Hence, it becomes necessary to be sensitive towards the community's understanding of the significance of a particular ritual. This brings us to the question of the ethicality of research and interpretation of a scholar of folklore. Elaine Lawless addressed this academic dilemma in 1992 and introduced the idea of reciprocal ethnography. This approach requires the folklorists to "return to the group being studied, bringing her analysis to discuss with the group and to ascertain their response to the interpretation" (Sims and Stephens 126).

4.2.5 Nature of Divinity in Folklore

Folklore also reflects the attitude of people toward religion and religious beliefs. For instance, during *kaatak* (considered as one of the holiest months across north India), Hindu women sing songs offering prayers to Hindu gods and goddesses. In one such song from Punjab, a woman wishes to meet lord Ram in order to make enquiries about *dharma*. This dialogic relationship between the creator and the creation is one of the characteristics of folk representations of gods. Folk representations do not glorify blind subservience to authority. On the contrary, it encourages critical reflection and dialogue. This tendency of critical engagement is reflected in the performance of several folk expressions. When older women narrate folktales, the audience often interrupts, asks questions, and seeks clarification. This attitude towards religious ideas and practices is liberating in many ways and reinforces the vitality and aliveness of folk traditions. It reiterates the fact that belief systems exist for and in individual performers and not vice-versa.

This attitude is also reflected in the way folklore represents gods. Often in folk stories and songs, we find divine figures walking among humans. In some cases, they are even judged by mortals. There is a popular folktale about Shiva and Parvati being judged by people for walking along with Nandi. Shiva and Parvati are amongst the most popular of folk deities. They appear in folktales across the Indian subcontinent. They are often seen touring the mortal realm, resolving problems of their devotees. No concern of humans is petty for them, they appear in day-to-day conversations of the mortals, they are often at the receiving end of both complaints and admiration from their devotees. In fact, scholars have pointed out that Shiva and Parvati's conjugal relationship is sometimes used in folktales to reflect the anxieties and power struggles of mortal married relationships. Margaret Egnor, in her research on folklore of Tamil Nadu, made the following observation, "The eternal conflict between spouses is abundantly reflected in Indian mythology, especially Tamil which debates the issues of male vs. female superiority back and forth endlessly on a cosmic level in the form of battles and contests between

deities or demons and their real or would-be mates" ("The Ideology of Love in Tamil Family" 1986).

Hence, we find Shiva and Parvati in petty arguments about superiority in several folktales. The folklore about religion then does not merely concern itself with philosophical and spiritual questions; gods and divine figures in folklore serve as a vehicle to address everyday mundane issues and struggles as well. Kunjabihari Das, in his *A Study of Orissan Folk-Lore*, while referring to the songs of ploughman says that, "The Gods and Goddesses of the ploughmen are like them...they plough and level the ground, plant and weed out the fields like common people for their livelihood"(25). In one of the folksongs cited by Das, Ram and Lakshman both appear as farmers working on the field, while Sita plants rice saplings. A.K. Ramanujan has often talked about the ambivalent and complex representations of figures of authority in Indian folktales. These representations recognise the social and religious significance of authorities, but they also infuse the narratives with much-needed satire and irony thereby creating spaces for challenging the dominant discourses of religious figures.

Another aspect of religious folklore are myths. All regions have their unique corpus of myths. In folk myths, one would often find vernacularisation of pan-Indian myths. One of the ways in which this is achieved is by having a classical mythological figure marry local deities, or people of significance. Folk myths reflect the intersections of various belief systems and how they operate and negotiate on ground.

In some cases, the folktales also provide alternatives to origin stories for characters that appear in classical tales. For instance, Ramanujan in his works and intensive field work across south India shows us that there are hundreds of versions available of Ramayana, with varied stories related to characters and their births. The representation of gods in folktales can provide us interesting insights into the philosophical conceptualization of a culture regarding the nature of afterlife and figures that are considered divine.

4.2.6 Folklore as Repository of Traditional Knowledge

In the earlier section, we saw how folklore expresses a culture's attitude towards religious authorities and religious beliefs. Folklore also becomes a very important repository of traditional knowledge. As we discussed in the introduction, most folk practices of religion lack written texts that document the significance of rituals or the intricacies of how to go about performing them. Yet somehow, the knowledge is diffused over and across generations. Folklore is an important medium through which this diffusion and communication is achieved. Songs and tales passed down and across generations talk about how to perform a particular ritual, when to perform it, and what is the significance of the performance. For instance, consider the following example: A woman is on a pilgrimage with her husband and, on the way, she loses him in the crowd. The woman prays to *devi* and seeks her assistance and blessings in finding her husband. The later part of the song goes on to enumerate the material needed in order to perform a prayer for the *devi*. After the woman is reconciled with her husband, she thanks the goddess, but with the consciousness that she has to keep her promise of performing the *puja* for the goddess. The song then establishes the nature of relationship between the devotee and the god, the power of prayer, and the correct way of conducting *puja* for a certain god. In this manner, the precise way in which the ritual needs to be performed is passed from one generation to

another, one individual to another through a song. Folklore then remains a very significant repository of regional knowledge.

4.3 LET US SUM UP

In conclusion, we can say that folklore and religion interact in complex ways. A close study of the same can provide scholars a nuanced understanding of how religion is practiced in reality, where it is often fluid, challenging theoretical categories of religious differences that are imposed upon them. Folklore then is one of the most realistic ways of understanding how religion functions, and the ways in which it interacts with communities that keep religious practices alive by practicing them. The new inductive approaches of doing folklore, with special focus on context-sensitivity and etic understandings of religious practices, allow us to arrive at analyses and interpretations that are closer to reality. Looking at folklore also demonstrates the pluralistic nature of what is normatively construed to be 'religion', liberating it from the monopoly of a few within 'organised' religion and placing it in the hands of the folk groups that practice it.

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4.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What are some of the challenges of defining religion?

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2. Critically analyse the academic evolution of the terms 'folk religion' and 'religious folklore'.

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3. What are the characteristics of vernacular religion that have traditionally separated it from 'official' and 'organised' religions?

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4. In what ways does the study of folklore expand our understanding of religion?

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5. With examples from folk religious practices known to you, think of the sociological or psychological functions that religious folklore might serve in a culture.

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6. As a student of folklore, what can be done by you to avoid received prejudices while interpreting and studying folk religious practices.

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7. What are some of the ways in which you can critically study the interactions between folklore and religion?

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8. The Indian subcontinent is characterised by multiplicity of religions. Discuss how study of folk religious practices can positively alter our perception of ways in which religions interact in public spaces.

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9. Demonstrate with an example how one's gender or caste can determine religious experiences within a folk culture.

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10. Discuss how folk religious practices reflect unique realities of a region while assimilating religious practices from 'organised' religions. Do this taking into account the heterogeneity of Indian population.

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